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Kid Nation: Television, Systemic Violence and Game Design

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At the conclusion of William Golding's parable *Lord of the Flies*, there is a moment when the entire novel's narrative is framed as a game. The protagonist Ralph finds himself mercilessly pursued by his former classmates, who have become hostile savages. When he stumbles upon a naval officer on the beach, however, the chase abruptly concludes as the officer peruses the "semicircle of little boys, their bodies streaked with coloured clay, sharp sticks in their hands" with a revolver at his side.[1] "Fun and games," are his words of dismissal, and with them he disenchants the life-and-death struggle among the children that is the substance of the book. "Reality" sets in, as the grown man and his holstered revolver abruptly introduce the adult world, bracketing off the events of the novel as part of one massive Huizingan *magic circle* of play that nevertheless caused the boys to forget their identities and to kill two of their own. Authentic danger is dismissed as merely ludic. The readers following the emotional roller coaster of the fiction up until this point are suddenly confronted with Golding's cold, deadpan fiat. Should the reader interpret the officer's statement on a metatextual level, they face two aporias: (1) whether or not Golding's fiction was itself simply a didactic game played with the reader, and (2) if there is not some fundamental brutality and transgression already inscribed into the very notion of "fun and games." For if an outsider to any human activity attributes a "lusory attitude"—a willing psychological subservience to a game, defined by Bernard Suits as a "voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles"[2]—to its participants' behavior, then what is to stop *any* observable human behavior, including torture and suffering, from becoming perceived as a game given the proper context?

On the other hand, reality itself can easily become abjected from a proposed gamespace, despite the all-too-real consequences of its persistent

influence. For example, in the fifth episode of the 2007 CBS reality show *Kid Nation*, council member Anjay confronts Markelle, who just tore down the posters of Taylor, a council candidate whom he dislikes. Markelle's justification for his deed is to trivialize the object of discussion: "Why not? It's a poster." Anjay responds by waxing philosophical about the disenchantment of their space: "Is this what Bonanza City was supposed to be? People ripping down other people's posters? This is everything the real world is. We do not want the real world." The gamespace of *Kid Nation* is conceived of as a sacred, positive space — a place where symbolic conflict must be banished in order to preserve the lusory attitude presumably held by all. In dialog with Golding, children's resolution of conflict in situations without adults somehow cannot be simultaneously *serious* and *real*; it is assumed that only the game's unnecessary obstacles hold authority over their actions, and Anjay's comment above concludes that games themselves embody a kind of administrative ideal. But Peter Firchow's commentary on *Lord of the Flies* may apply here: "Golding's intention is to establish, even at the cost of a drastic lack of realism, something like a laboratory situation.... The very lack of realism, the very extremity of the situation, calls attention to the 'experiment' that is being conducted in the novel."[3] In contrast, however, *Kid Nation* seems neither equally conscious of its own artificiality nor particularly interested in exploring the ways in which its forty child participants are, in fact, *powerless* over their fate due to unnecessary obstacles arrayed before them by the producers. The show does not ask whether a game is actually being played before or with the viewer, and categorically refuses the primacy of diverse game logics over its content.

A reality show about children's survival, *Kid Nation* inevitably invokes the discourse of children's' independence and, with it, Golding's famous parable. Indeed, Mike Meloy writes that "the show seemed to have a *Lord of the Flies* air about it: forty kids tribalized into competing factions without adults or clear rules governing their behavior in an abandoned town [Bonanza City] in the middle of the New Mexico desert."[4] Certainly the Golding analogy and that of the John Ford western are so overdetermined as to be the show's primary *architexts*, self-designated generic references that correspondingly shape the arc of a textual narrative, as formulated by Gérard Genette.[5] *Qua* Golding: there is a group of kids, assembled as an impromptu nation outside of direct contact with outside civilization, who inevitably descend into "madness" and decrepitude. Yet *qua* Ford: through their actions and inner moral character, the kids establish some semblance of ordered "civilization" against all odds.[6] Naturally, this somewhat cynically idealist scenario was created as controversial link bait, the show itself an imaginative spin-off of CBS' popular *Survivor* reality format that inherently begged questions of how conscionable

it was to submit children to both the elements *and* to the whims of reality TV producers.[7] The question this essay seeks to answer, however, is not so much about the show's generic overtones,[8] courting of controversy,[9] presumptions about class mobility,[10] or wider transmedia interactions.[11] Rather, it is: to what extent is a reality show such as *Kid Nation* best parsed as a dramaturgical meeting point between a live-action *game* and a television *show*? That is to say, how might a failed TV program point to failures in game design, as well as the parapraxis inherent in reality itself when subjected to these game rules?

Reality Shows—More Game Than Reality

Reality shows are, in fact, barely conceivable without a competitive element facilitated by game rules. As Olaf Hoerschelmann writes, "audience members perform [in these shows] as individuals and participate in a form of mediated public life, yet at the same time, specific rules govern their participation and the authority of a host supervises them."[12] Yet little work has been done on the impact those rules have had on the shows' dramaturgy. This fact is especially surprising considering the two reality *game* shows *Survivor* (2000) and *American Idol* (2002) became, as Henry Jenkins notes, "the first killer [applications] of media convergence—the big new thing that demonstrated the power that lies at the intersection of old and new media."[13] Dominant scholarship instead focuses on its documentary heritage,[14] generic codes and stereotypes,[15] and its overall pre-packaged banality.[16] In other words, methodologies focus on those aspects of reality television most emphasized in mainstream critical discourse: reality shows as cheap exploitation of both the documentary tradition and the gullible participants themselves in order to emphasize suspenseful elements of a given scenario for the sake of selling viewers' audited eyeballs to advertisers. This limited approach is, on a pragmatic level, due in no small part to television studies' fairly recent assertion of legitimacy as a field, and an attempt to distinguish "quality" television from the trash. By contrast, game studies has only recently become academicized, and is understandably more preoccupied with the symbolic dissection of triple–A video game titles rather than the application of its formidable methods on other media such as reality shows.

But one could make the overarching argument that game rules are so integral to the structures of modern television—from the demands of televised football plays to game shows that impose artificial choices on their contestants for the sake of viewers at home—that the medium itself has arguably

become a mere delivery technology for the playing and depiction of games, whether they be sports, machinima, or reality programming. Sheila Murphy sees television as a key centerpiece even of a digital media culture: "TV continues to provide a framework for digital media experience in an era when we are told, once again, to engage with 'smart TV.'"[17] And certainly media scholar Jason Mittel seeks a non-trivial answer to the question: "How might we conceive of [a TV series] as a video game?"[18] Games unleash their participants into dynamic digital and/or social systems, which can then be documented and retooled to engage viewers' expectations about how those systems play out. The systems by their very nature transmit ideology, or a series of expectations about how social reality functions. Mutually exclusive clichés like "working hard to get ahead" or "opportunity knocks but once" are more easily (pre-)scripted through footage of confrontations with unnecessary obstacles than with the messy, uneven business of humans laboring (or not) to survive.

The "reality" evident in a reality show thus corresponds more with the obvious, real-life stakes of preconceived contests and tournaments than the faithful representation of processes that affect our day-to-day lives. It likely comes as no shock to the modern viewer that games increasingly determine television, and the television as a medium determines what games are suitable to perpetuate its content flow. Staged contests, the illusion of chance, the suspense of variable reward systems; these patterns of game design all garner attention from fan communities eager to see the effects of imposed strictures on contestants. By watching a show such as *Kid Nation*, the viewer tacitly consumes dramaturgy of events that straddles somewhere between a psychology experiment, *bourgeois* melodrama, sports coverage and a documentary. At the same time, however, *Kid Nation* lets the promise linger that one might see the televisual evocation of "'the state of nature,' that hypothetical utopian/dystopian condition postulated by seventeenth- and eighteenth century philosophers from Hobbes to Rousseau."[19] It promised the audience a scenario in dialog with films like *Battle Royale* (2000), only without the battle, or *The Hunger Games* (2012) without the hunger. So if it does not deliver on this promise, is the show then a failed allegory? Or might one profitably interpret it as heavily augmented documentation of *non-fictional immersive play*, in which the forty child participants played their public and private "selves" for television, both of which were subsumed under the strictures of a game. I argue here that *Kid Nation*'s immersed subjects are not so much dealing with the exigencies of an existence without adults as they are navigating elaborate systems of control erected *in place of* the adults. For if the Lord of the Flies did not exist, television producers would have him invented, or at least stage his appearance for the sake of next week's ratings.

Game / Logic

What is meant by "game" anyway? Bernard Suits' definition of a game as the "voluntary overcoming of unnecessary obstacles" forms a worthy theoretical foundation. But the contemporary scholar who most productively articulates the concept for broader analysis is undoubtedly Jane McGonigal. She identifies four traits that inhere within all games: "a *goal, rules,* a *feedback system*, and *voluntary participation*."[20] Goals are attainable outcomes that provide the players with a "sense of purpose," rules are the agreed-upon limitations in attaining this outcome, the feedback system tells one how close one is to the outcome and encourages achievement, and voluntary participation of the participants accedes to all of the above. By manipulating each individual element, a game designer structures the efforts, rewards and perceptions of efforts/rewards that guide human behavior toward modes of action and communication. Every game, well-designed or not, has its participants enact some form of ideology, a way of viewing the role of individual behavior within societal systems.

The primary preoccupation of every game designer is how to incentivize or discourage certain behaviors to achieve their design goals. Progress through these incentives creates narrative itself, and this progress is usually framed via media embedded into the game's aesthetic.[21] Gary Genosko argues that any media form, including games, accrues symbolic potency as it encounters other media flows: "The meeting of flows creates, in other words, meanings."[22] Through game design, one re/produces conditioned processes of signification and epistemology using the vehicle of the player, who maneuvers through symbolic reward systems.

A simple example of the above is in basketball's court design. With the *goal* being to amass the greatest number of points through baskets scored, the very spatiality of the court is centered on the polar opposite midpoints of a rectangle, with the box and the three-point line primarily delineating distance from the target. Both court markers serve as a feedback system to inform the player how far they are from the basket, and foreclose certain strategic approaches to the basket: one cannot, for example, slam dunk from the 3-point line. Gradually, a strategy develops that involves the basketball players moving the most efficiently to chart effective vectors to the basket. These strategies then take on heightened meaning when observed and commented upon by a sports program, or receive literary attention like in Carl Deuker's novel *On the Devil's Court*, another work similar to Golding's about the power of a game over children's lives. By observing the way basketball players negotiate a single game logic, we learn lessons about how to navigate other situations involving imaginary obstacles.

Like a game, television itself is a controlled feedback system that updates its users on (1) the progress of any given team toward a goal, (2) the rules and the players' adherence to them, and (3) the visible strategies the players deploy to maneuver toward the goal with or without breaking the rules. But the game feedback that television provides is also highly suspect in forming a *coherent* meaning; commercial breaks interrupt the flow of feedback (though never catastrophically) and insert other agendas into the viewers' consciousness. Television programmers often hedge their bets by offering contradictory incentive systems to as wide a possible demographic, in which the overall reward for continued viewing of a game — namely, knowledge of who won — is paralleled or even outstripped by the audio-visual rewards of high-budget commercials, the color commentators' mastery of the arbitrary aside, the cheerleaders, fan antics, and so on. The simplicity of the court is televisually replaced by a glut of different short-, medium- and long-term reward systems, all of which are designed to emotionally reconfigure the story arc of a game played to the advantage of the game's stakeholders. When this meeting of flows works for a program's producers, the result is intense viewer involvement; when it malfunctions, it results in noticeably incoherent and uncomfortable narratives that reveal the structures underpinning them. In any case, it is nigh impossible for the television viewer to be able to simply observe the game strategies used without an editor intervening and mediating these strategies. Television itself becomes part of the game.

Game elements and televisual tropes combined together — smiling hosts, leader boards, high-key lighting and post-competition interviews — often call attention to a television program's openly artificial qualities. Forged primarily in the editing room, reality television shows exhibit gaps in narrative and visual logic that constantly risk cognitive or emotional alienation from its constructed "reality." One of the reality show format's chief critics, Bill Nichols, intuits why this is:

> There is no "Aha!" on reality TV. A subsuming "logic" absorbs all incommensurate juxtapositions. It denies contradiction by refusing to propose any frame from which more local gaps, disturbances, or incompatibilities could be rearranged coherently.[23]

Nichols' critique is that the feedback reality television provides is *too* controlled, the gamespace[24] so all-encompassing as to stifle the very interest the show is designed to elicit for the advertisers. He accuses reality television of standing "in an antithetical relationship to the project of an existential phenomenology."[25] Rather than exposing the viewer to untold facets of existence, reality TV instead has the viewer play the pre-scripted *voyeur* in a tightly controlled game environment designed to not only engulf the narrative but even the potential possibilities of interpretation itself. The thought aligns with

Jonathan Beller's notion of the "cinematic mode of production," a specific subjective regime which captures the consumer's attention itself for the sake of hyper-accumulation by a financial elite.[26] Should a reality game show's producers attempt to relax their control over the documentation of a given reality game, as social advertising guru Billee Howard advises,[27] a medium so thoroughly entrenched within these logics such as television may very well disallow them from doing so. Despite the risk of losing active viewer involvement, reality television shows usually use game elements as ornamentation of an otherwise purely emotional spectacle engineered for the sake of capital.

Kid Nation is therefore a reality show under the thumb of multiple different masters whose interest does not lie in the documentation of children attempting to build their own society. The totalitarian logic of the social and material systems that underwrite television programming forbids an actual, non-fictional, immersive *Lord of the Flies* scenario filmed by an adult camera crew, if only for what it might have revealed about children. The show might have depicted children overcoming necessary obstacles without their parents by adopting what psychologist Michael Tomasello calls a "shared intentionality"[28] to combat looming threats to their survival. Instead the show resorts to unnecessary obstacles — Voice of God suggestions from the producers, arbitrary social stratification, physical challenges, extrinsic rewards, constrained options — to railroad[29] the 40 children's group narrative into an easily manipulable object at the expense of spontaneity and interest. Game rules take the place of active adults controlling the children's' lives, but an adult presence is still very palpable. These rules constitute not only failures in the production's vision, but also notional failures in game design.

Cynical Design for Systemic Violence

Immersive live-action gameplay can and should be stimulating to watch,[30] with its inherent goals, rules, strategies and participant enthusiasm all on display for the viewers to explore. To design a scenario that would immerse its subjects in the tasks of survival the way that *Kid Nation* promised, we might refer to the patterns of game design articulated by Staffan Björk and Jussi Holopainen. A designer seeking player immersion within a scenario, like for the kids within Bonanza City, wants the players to have a parallel awareness of both the game and the reality that contextualizes it. "[Immersion] does not mean that players are unaware of their surroundings or that they are playing a game," Björk and Holopainen argue, "but rather that they are deeply focused on the interaction they are having within the game."[31] This state of

being is instantiated by the characteristics of "Narrative Structures, Characters, Avatars, Game Worlds, [Overcoming] Goals and the presence of Freedom of Choice."[32] The players can recognize, but are deeply involved with, story arcs, protagonists and their representations, and agency to effect progress toward their goals. Immersion is in many cases a particularly persuasive prompting of a participant's imagination. Note that most of Björk and Holopainen's structures are based on around the construction of a fictional persona within a fictional gameworld, rather than playing oneself in a live-action game show. The key idea in documenting such a game would be to keep those fictional elements the players find immersive in view without losing sight of the corporeal realities of the unnecessary obstacles posed by these elements.

By contrast, *Kid Nation* is a documentation of psychological stress under the totalitarian regime of reality television game strictures. *Kid Nation* as a game — the rules of which I describe in the section below — seeks to convince its participants that the show is actually not a game, nor even a summer camp; both contexts most American kids would otherwise find socially intelligible. Writer Tom Forman and CBS executive Ghen Maynard, the two major creative forces behind the show, saw it no less than an existential test that let children "prove to adults that they were capable of doing more than anyone thought they could ever do."[33] In doing so, they transform a potentially ludic or creative space into a competitive rat maze predetermined entirely by adults.[34] The children's "test" does not even begin with their own standards for survival, but with those of an adult reality show such as *Survivor*. In a contemporary review of the show in *USA Today*, for example, Marilyn Elias writes that "*Kid Nation* emphasizes some of the worst aspects of society, such as group inequalities and fighting for limited resources."[35] Institutional structures such as school or summer camp are the generally accepted basis for arbitrary groups of children to gather around labor and meals. But the direct competition Elias describes as emerging from the show's artificially imposed class hierarchies — competition which Björk and Holopainen describe as antithetical to "Experimentation"— emerges from the game rules, replacing institutional structures with diffuse *systemic violence*.

Systemic violence, as Slavoj Žižek defines it, "is no longer attributable to concrete individuals and their 'evil' intentions, but is purely 'objective,' systemic, anonymous."[36] It is the violence imposed not by individuals, but by cultures and systems: racism, resource extraction, fundamentalist crusades, and institutional indifference to human need are all manifestations of it. No one can be held responsible for it, which is what allows it to flourish. Systemic violence allows capital losses to be socialized, failures to be personalized, and individuals to be hierarchized[37] within an apparently classless society.

The game of *Kid Nation* engages most obviously in systemic violence

through a four-rank caste system. The "upper class" makes the most money and has no assigned tasks, the "merchant class" gets half as much and runs the general store, the "cooks class" gets a meager salary and run the kitchens, and the "laborer class" gets almost no money and has to perform the unwanted tasks (i.e., cleaning the outhouses, fetching water). This system of rule is enforced by the presence of the show's host and crew, and is symbolized by a jobs board overlooking the town (and which burns to the ground in Episode 13). In his essay "From *Kid Nation* to Caste Nation," Mike Meloy argues that *Kid Nation*'s class antagonisms rest partially on the American glorification of unfettered social mobility and conspicuous consumption.[38] The "caste" game mechanic increases pressure on the physical challenges, which are the true gatekeepers of social mobility, while also providing a moral standard by which to judge the protagonists between said challenges. It allows viewers to indulge in a fantasy of a society that rewards winners, punishes losers, and gives a notional chance to let the losers become winners. The children are meanwhile subjected to the threefold consequences of a caste system based on arbitrary challenges injected into a community out to preserve and cultivate its resources: (1) children must endure a miniature form of class oppression, (2) talent and experience with regard to the game environment are *not* factors for appointing labor,[39] and (3) patriarchal authority outside of the children's social sphere robs them of their overall autonomy. That is to say, there were suspected "lasting emotional injuries to some children involved,"[40] not to mention the painful viewing experience of watching children contort themselves to expectations of absent adults.

Debbie Clare Olson laments the adult realities imposed on the children of *Kid Nation*, calling the resultant systemic violence a result of the "death of play."[41] Her theory is that *Kid Nation* places children in a proto-capitalist space that meanwhile deprives them of the "natural" imaginary space of most children. She sees the game rules of *Kid Nation* as "insidiously [manipulating children] into creating the illusion of a paradise that, in reality, is a glorification of … childhood's demise."[42] She frames the social mechanisms of the show (i.e. the unstated game rules) as the means to a cult built around consumerism and reductive thinking. In fact, the mechanisms appear only to provide a conflict motivation outside of the human factors already inherent in a children's survival scenario:

> The cult of the child is not just misplaced; it is missing in *Kid Nation*. Instead, the series structures a replica of the adult world: a cult of consumerism that inserts desirable products (and the children are encouraged to desire them) and infects their budding society with adult prejudices (groupings by color and class), intolerances (religion), social Darwinism (showdowns), and capitalist exploitation (wage hierarchies and labor exploitation). What *Kid Nation* does not give the viewer is

the vision of play, make-believe, creativity, imagination, and the general joy of experiencing the world through a child's eyes, the very things idealized by those adults who search for a return to youth.[43]

This critique of the show more or less sums up the chief impositions made on the children by the producers: the children are not confronting some kind of frontier reality, but an invented game of adulthood in line with generic conventions of *Survivor* or other competitive reality shows. The show's participants are not only denied much of their comforts of home, but they are also denied the ability to play and imagine as a collective. Olson certainly keeps the cult of childhood — the adult worship of children as innocent and playful — in perspective in her piece, but she still abjects the negotiations of the adult world in favor of her own idealized form of play. This comes across as Huizingan thinking, much like Golding's dismissive officer: children are free to create powerful "magic circles" of play that adults nevertheless retain the authority to dispel. Nevertheless, the danger remains of what Huizinga calls "false play," the co-opting of play by organizations that manage it for their own ends.[44] What Olson's argument lacks is a recuperative notion of *game design*: that not all manipulation of human behavior is inherently bad, and that games could impart some serious shared intentionality unto the children by tuning incentives to fit their needs and providing the tools necessary to create shared bonds of experience. The fact that the *Kid Nation* game produces toxic competition has to do with how few incentives there are for cooperation within the reality show's unspoken game rules.

The Game Rules of Kid Nation

What then are the master rules of the game called *Kid Nation*? Here is an attempt at an answer. To set up the game, first gather 40 children between the ages of 8 and 15 to a location isolated enough to preclude travel of over a mile away. Then transport said 40 children to just outside the ghost town and charge them the task of building a community and surviving for 40 days. Provisions for these children for 40 days must be provided, as well as the bare minimum facilities (outhouses, water pump, kitchen, etc.), which are conspicuous in their insufficiency for the comfort of all. Divide the 40 children up into four teams, distinguished with bandanas: green, red, yellow, blue. Arbitrarily choose a child from each team to be one of the first four council members. Tell those four that they are in charge of the town, which means serving as a leader for one's own team, reading the producer-created pioneer's journal for the stakes of a given "episode," periodically deciding who deserves

an out-of-game financial award (the gold star) for good behavior, and choosing which in-game prize the whole town gets if every team completes a physical challenge, usually a choice between a practical comfort (i.e. more outhouses) and an impractical luxury (i.e. a water slide). Next, pre-determine a narrative: create a script, if you will. To make sure the pre-determined narrative is being followed, have a moderator (Jonathan Karsh) occasionally shout "Pioneers, gather up!" and introduce the next big plot point, such as the job board.

Plan to assign castes to the children as a result of the first physical challenge, and create a job board. This is a completely arbitrary game show task that has nothing to do with long-term survival needs. The job board will serve as a symbol that maintains the caste order. The highest caste gets the most money (in town credit to buy frivolous supplies at the merchant store) and the least work, while the lowest caste gets the least money and the most work, etc. Keep changing the rules using the pioneer journal, and be prepared to dismantle and reconfigure these systems as needed to "add interest" for television viewers.

In principle then, there are multiple minigames and outside actors that have major influence on this purportedly self-contained *Lord of the Flies* scenario. Using the McGonigal definition of a game mentioned earlier, here are the parallel games running within the scenario:

- **Game 1: Survival**—The goal is to incur no health problems. The rules are to cooperate with the other children to survive. The feedback system is one's own body, and voluntary participation is, as with all the games, mandatory.
  Scale: Collective vs. Environment

- **Game 2: Good Sport**—The goal is to win a gold star to boost one's own family income. The rules revolve around an appearance of compassion and leadership at the right moments while council members are nearby. The feedback system is based on the behavior of past winners of gold stars and otherwise withheld for suspense purposes.
  Scale: Individual vs. Expectation[45]

- **Game 3: Caste System**—The goal is to win the assignment of any caste on the job board except the "laborer class" for the team. The rules are dictated by the individual challenge, usually a time-sensitive obstacle requiring group problem solving to overcome. If one team cannot complete the challenge before the time runs out, the collective loses the possible reward. The feedback system is clearest here: measurable progress toward the challenge's ostensible finish line. Other teams' progress also provides feedback.
  Scale: Team vs. Team, Collective vs. Challenge

- **Game 4: Producer's Fiat** — The goal is to satisfy the demands of pro-
  ducers by producing dramatic action that conforms to expectation. The
  rules are based on the whim of the production crew's expectations of the
  moment. The feedback system is opaque, given the lack of knowledge
  of how the footage will be edited.
  Scale: Individual and Collective vs. Producer Expectation

   Though the stated goal of a *Lord of the Flies* simulation might be to play
Game 1, Games 2–4 are *Kid Nation*'s emphasis by far. In confessionals, pro-
tagonists such as Greg and Mike emote about potentially attaining a gold
star, Laurel waxes about finally leaving the laborer class,[46] and no council
member ever seeks to interrogate the "wisdom" passed down by the early set-
tlers. Obviously the editing prioritizes the elements that the show's producers
introduced into the scenario to give the 40 days an episodic arc for the season.
Nevertheless, the four games listed above compete for priority in such a way
as to highlight both the constructedness of the program and its consequent
dissimilitude with anything resembling a place where kids reign supreme.
The health of the collective should naturally remain the top priority, but
extrinsic rewards (gold stars) are given only to individuals who stand out as
helpers of the collective. The scenario pits individualism against collectivism,
the desire for survival against physical violence against the desire to live an
existence of leisure supported by systemic violence, and the producers' game-
play narratives against the evolving story of children having to manage on
their own.
   There is some degree to which the ideology lying behind this game is
best exposed by contrasting it with an earlier ideology about games for chil-
dren. Consider for example the "Nineteen Principles" set out by Howard
Braucher, Secretary of the National Recreation Association in the 1930s, that
are to underpin children's game activities (paraphrased here): a broad range
of said activities, personal satisfaction, small spaces and small amounts of
time, memorability, the encouragement of positive reading habits, a few songs,
artistry, exposure to sunlight, hobby formation, rhythm, ceremonial eating,
time for repose, immersion, personal achievement, employment of seldom-
used skills, play that can transfer to adulthood, citizen formation, and for-
mation of a community to continue this recreation. The thirteenth principle,
immersion, is actually framed as "those recreation activities ... which most
completely command the individual so that he loses himself in them and gives
all that he has and is to them."[47] These principles, including that of immersive
recreation, are each gainsaid to some degree by the implicit principles of *Kid
Nation*: televisual activities mixed with the daily grind, inherent caste-based
dissatisfaction, lots of space and a 40 day duration, digital memorability, read-

ing as not really a priority, no music or rhythm, few crafts, exposure to sunlight, idleness, mess-hall eating, camera confessionals, immersion in game constructions over survival concerns, personal financial gain, employment of seldom-used skills, rehearsal of adulthood, desiring subject formation, and clique formation.

The game of *Kid Nation* is also that of media exposure, or how to ignore the camera and production crew while nevertheless getting them to follow one around. When Sophia takes to the streets to dance her way into some extra money for a bike in Episode 2, for example, there appears to be an agreement between her and the crew that she would do something appropriately televisual to get other citizens to donate some of the fruits of their labor power to her. And 10-year-old Taylor virtually models for the camera each time she cries or imposes order. She looks like an archetypal female child fashion model, and takes on the archetype of the soulless hedonist multiple times in the series to provide a suitable antagonist for the children who otherwise abide by the system. The meta-game of television — its slots, minutes of airtime, and fickle audiences — guide the very footsteps the *Kid Nation* subjects take, the words uttered before the camera, and the society they choose to erect.

Another function of these competing game logics is to posit, via the imposition of false choices, the radical equivalency of *all* objects. Systemic violence acts by way of rendering all accessible in the symbolic and material realms as commodities. No better object lesson of this can be found than in the choices the town council must make at the end of a physical challenge. For example in Episode 5, the council must choose between steak for all and 40 toothbrushes as a town reward. They get one option and, though out in the desert, have to decide to "discard" the other. Let us unpack the situation for a moment: the town council won this privilege of choice based on the fact that all four teams manage to pop balloons with presidents' faces and put them in the right chronological order. This achievement gives them the right to at least choose between dental hygiene/wasting food and rotten teeth/full bellies. The town, having been atomized into selfish beings through the caste system, cries hungrily for the steak. "Council members," Jonathan Karsh says with his high-school track coach tenor, "It's pretty clear what your town wants, but you are the politicians.... It's time to ... talk it out and let us know what you're going to do." A costly item such as steak is suddenly in the same camp as the virtually worthless toothbrushes.

Does Karsh want to help teach them a lesson about the indispensability of mundane, cheap objects over luxury items that are expensive to haul out into the desert? This choice depicts the *Kid Nation*'s producers' power over the council rather than *vice versa*. Either choice will elicit a certain televisually desirable discontentment within the ranks of the children. If they had chosen

the steak, then the camera crew would have the added pleasure of documenting the kids' hedonistic joy of consuming it. Since they chose the toothbrushes, however, an orchestra and timpani declares their right/pragmatic choice on behalf of the collective. The cycle repeats a dozen more times over the course of Season 1: daily labor then leads to a completely unrelated challenge that then offers a completely unrelated reward that may or may not impact the long-term health of the community. The game choice smacks of inauthenticity when serving as an assessment of the children's' capacity to distinguish between needs and wants. True, they reached this point thanks to collective perform-ance, but the labor on the challenge is completely divorced from the reward. The message taught to the players is not "hard work will be rewarded in kind," but the more conditional "hard work will be rewarded by the miracles of finance capital (via the commodified labor relations necessary to deliver steak to their doorstep in the desert), but not in a way related to your work." As a *caveat* to those who would argue that at least the children received tooth-brushes: the general store run by the merchants serves tooth enamel-eroding soda. That is to say, the 40 toothbrushes constitute the conjured solution to the problem the producers themselves created. The issues are thus not between need and want, but about the ability of television to profile consumer goods as so desirable that their mere presence nearby would overwhelm practical needs required for a healthy sustained existence (i.e., toothbrushes).

As a game, *Kid Nation* is then potentially in dialog with two others: Will Wright's computer simulation *The Sims* and Vincent Baker's tabletop role-playing game *Apocalypse World*. In the former, players adopt a God-like role in manipulating representations of lowly humans as they go about their day-to-day lives within limited material and psychic economies. In the latter, players play humans in an isolated community called a "holding" 50 years after the end of the world and, thanks to the help of character-based rule-altering Moves, can substantially affect this new world around them. Both games are about pioneering new human relations within spaces of scarcity, much like *Kid Nation*. What reveals the reality show's incoherent game design, however, are the alternate reward systems for story-related action. *The Sims* rewards players for *constant vigilance* over their Sims, ensuring that they are well-fed and trained in how to make themselves happy. It uses a bird's-eye camera to monitor them, much like the frequent flyover shots in *Kid Nation* used to convey the viewer's mastery over these children and their town. Stories in *The Sims* emerge from sheer attention paid to an individual or group of Sims and resources allocated to them. *Apocalypse World* rewards players for *constant interventions in the story* based on the aspects of their characters that other players highlight. The world and its rules are literally determined by the alternating Moves between the players and the MC[48] to enhance the gut-

level power of the emergent fiction. Stories in *Apocalypse World* emerge from Moves characters make in light of the scarcity of resources, but not as a sheer expression of them. Characters determine their own path, and the world follows behind to accommodate them. *Kid Nation* certainly keeps constant vigilance over its children participants, but the children are more or less powerless to generate new resources without the help of the producers. And though the children in *Kid Nation* may make bold decisions within their own holding, they cannot alter the pioneer guidebook, the physical challenges, the caste system or the council structure; all instruments of their own class oppression. Whereas both *The Sims* and *Apocalypse World* provide game vehicles for scarcity-based storytelling, *Kid Nation* provides a vehicle for dealing with nothing but the game show's logic itself.

Naturally, the children eventually conform to the gamespace that surrounds them. Mia Consalvo affirms that players play games to reflexively adjust themselves to their challenges within their context:

> There is no innocent gaming.... Players also have real lives, with real commitments, expectations, hopes, and desires.... Games are created through the act of gameplay, which is contingent on acts by players. Those acts are always, already, contextual and dynamic."[49]

Take, for example, 9-year-old Emily of Nevada in Episode 2 who protests the chickens being killed by 15-year-old Greg, who ostensibly is doing it only for the extrinsic reward.[50] The episode centers in on her conflict between putting up her symbolic protest of the chickens or letting the town walk all over her. But the game found here is not so much whether or not she resists, but whether or not she leaves. Despite town peer pressure that silences her protest, she decides to stay with the village once she realizes the whole *Kid Nation* project is a game about staying power: "When my mom told me to come here, she told me to be a rough and tough cowgirl. So, I'm going to stay." On the one hand, players like Greg watch the importance of the game's extrinsic rewards supersede Game 1— Survival in terms of motivation. On the other hand, players like Emily have become aware of the incentivization systems at play and want to show they can withstand them. Both types of players can be easily incorporated into the logic of *Kid Nation*, though neither will ever quite find the level of autonomy they both apparently seek through the means of money and freedom.

The show's apparent breakdown in order after the job board is lit on fire by the production crew in the last episode (Episode 13) also shows the level to which the participants have adjusted to the producers' arbitrary game rules. Recall Jonathan Karsh's promises from Episode 2, resonating with Meloy's class mobility-based argument about the show: "It's time for the next showdown, where you guys can change your place in society, your job, and your

salary. And if you *really* try hard, the Council will give you that gold star."
The game reality appeals to both notions of continuous rebirth within society
and the virtue's reward. The destruction of the job board, which otherwise
allowed the children to say "That's her job, not mine," actually prompts a
run on the general food store, namely the candy section. This has been por-
trayed as the ultimate *Lord of the Flies* moment: the breakdown of the societal
order leading to utter chaos. But the viewer should be skeptical that this is
the children's inherent/natural state. Indeed, Karsh again frames a false choice,
as with all the objects before: "You can keep working as you have been, or
you can do ... whatever you want." Well, the first thing the children want is
to have the journal — the producers' master discourse about the town — set
on fire. After that, they then endeavor to produce their own narrative by raid-
ing the candy store and reallocating themselves to the bunks that they see fit.
DK reminds his fellow participants to "use your brain! The job board is not
the freakin' town!" But the extent to which the job board determined social
realities for the residents of *Kid Nation* for so long that the playful, imaginative
sphere of childhood bursts forth into Dionysian violence. Karsh intervenes
and has the children perform one final challenge — the cleaning up of the
town for their parents — before conducting the final town hall meeting and
advising the participants as they go to go forth and make "a better world."

The "better world" the children might create, however, would benefit
greatly from cooperative game mechanics such as those of Jane McGonigal,[51]
who is famous for re-tooling incentive systems to get game players to break down
social barriers and produce active knowledge about their environment. If the
show's goal was to prove how tough and smart children can be, it erred in the
favor of proving how cunning they were in order to work within the interlinked
structures of an equally cunning game that would — any way one looks at
it — produce supposedly high-quality reality TV. The neoliberal relocation of
an entire community of young people to an artificial clime and the expectation
of innovation amidst an environment of absolute institutional and financial
control both seem like dubious scenarios in which to expect children to pro-
duce moral behavior. Instead, the game design has these little adults play out
a reward system that dictates one must compete among artificially imposed
classes in order to survive as the financial elite decide what two choices this
child proletariat should be given at the end of every Sisyphus-like challenge.

Conclusion

This essay has dealt briefly with the mechanics of a show teasing viewers
with the possibility of viewing a radical form of freedom expressed through

children on their own, and instead using multiple systems of control to make them conform to very specific societal and reality television standards. This fact is due in no small part to television itself framing imposed restraints that benefit neoliberal capitalism as "reality." 13-year-old Natasha's mother, Isa Goenaga, suggests an even more disturbing connection between "fun" and "reality," namely: "Competition made it more fun for them.... [*Kid Nation*] is an accurate depiction of our society. You have to work hard, and you have to work harder than the next guy to move up in life."[52] In her paradigm, "fun" is perceived as the reward of hard work and winning against competitors. But hard work in *Kid Nation* is perversely rewarded with either total lack of responsibility (i.e., upper class privileges from the physical challenges) or a gold star that's inherently worthless within the game itself. That hard work does not necessarily guarantee comfort or security is indeed a fact of life. But that hard work is actively discouraged by the caste system reveals much more about the mechanisms of reality television and its motivating game logic[53] than it does about what children would do when left to their own devices in such a scenario. *Kid Nation*'s portrayal of a hardscrabble existence against multiple arbitrary structures may indeed be more a self-reflexive expression of the show's own navigation of the social Darwinian environment of 21st Century television production. Reality shows have flourished because they are cheap products, and as cheap products they are disposable and interchangeable. As one NBC executive once put it: "There is a little survival-of-the-fittest thing [reality programming] ends up creating."[54]

Thus the frontier at which both the kids on *Kid Nation* and its viewers find themselves is not between the wilderness and civilization, but between a reality governed by conventional means of socio-political power — charisma, bureaucracy and/or fear — and one governed by an ever-expanding game world, hastily designed for the sake of short-term television ratings and containing mutually contradictory incentive systems (i.e., desire to survive vs. desire to do nothing to ensure that survival). This author joins with Olson and Meloy in deploring the results of a television experiment gone awry: the influx of television's easily tapped logics of class conflict and zero-sum competition into *Kid Nation* was what drove viewers away. Perhaps the audience wished to discover that American children in *Kid Nation* would not fall into the same delusions of power as in *Lord of the Flies*, but would rather work out a shaky collective through long-term trial and error. The crew could have silently observed as events unfolded. As Jacques Ranciere reminds us, "television broadcasting has its Other: the effective performance of the set."[55] One might have seen these children play, interact, form relationships and negotiate the strange new situation in which they found themselves. "Fantasy, imagination and a joyful technology of foolishness" are what some French post-

structuralists would recommend in encounters with "mapping unknown terrain,"[56] rather than solely emphasizing dull hard work, obedience and the American disciplines of competitive personnel management built into reality television.

Games are their own medium, and thus can be designed in alignment with any given program's overall goals. As with television, games constrain, allow for, and reinforce certain types of play.[57] Any reality television activity that imposes unnecessary obstacles beyond those of accepted society is inherently a game, and therefore can be studied as an object of game design. In fact, a certain playfulness is actively encouraged within the design of reality shows. James Poniewozik defends the medium on the grounds of its potential for play: "A great reality–TV concept takes some commonplace piety of polite society and gives it a wedgie." Reality television enacts blank parodies of human affairs, rather than serving as serious meditation on human existence. That being said, however, both reality television and games share the characteristic of enacting *ideology* through the users' interactions with their content. *Kid Nation* is a perfect example of a bad object that rendered both its televisual and game ideologies all too clearly. The compromised feedback mechanisms of the show made it too freeform to be a game show and too constrained to be a documentation of the *Lord of the Flies* state of nature that viewers perhaps hoped for with more than a little *schadenfreude*.

I wish to end by returning to the Golding analogy at the beginning of this article. In the novel, the officer with his revolver reinstates patriarchal authority by dismissing the activities of Ralph and the rest as "fun and games." The description presumes the existence of a magic circle formed by the children that then is dissected by the entry of an adult viewpoint. This dismissal of the children's fight for survival as a ludic experience is reversed in the context of *Kid Nation*; the ludic transforms into the authentic during the latter half of Episode 13 "We've All Decided to Go Mad!" After participating in a mini-orgy of consumption in the candy store, the pioneers are then "gathered up" for a challenge to clean up Bonanza City for some special guests. Sweeping music introduces those special guests as their parents — the adult intervention — and they come running into town to embrace their children. After a shared meal, the parents then visit the children's homes, only to be relatively underwhelmed by the filth and mediocrity of the children's existence, thanks to the moralizing editing. Anjay was right in that respect: Bonanza City prior to the arrival of the adults was not really the "real world," but a series of games orchestrated by the producers that nevertheless promoted the idea that the kids were somehow in charge. The gaze of the concerned parents trained on the children's spaces, not insignificantly shaped by what producers were willing to provide, suddenly brings reality home to the viewer. Games now played

within global economic realities are serious, but perhaps the liminal gamespace of reality television is the most serious and real of all.

Notes

1. Golding, *Lord of the Flies* 246.
2. Suits, *The Grasshoper* 54.
3. Firchow, *Modern Utopian Fictions* 142.
4. Meloy, "From *Kid Nation* to Cast Nation" 1.
5. Summarized in Stam, Burgoyne and Flitterman-Lewis, *New Vocabularies* 212.
6. Gallagher, *John Ford* 417.
7. Throughout this article, I use the "children" to denote the *Kid Nation* participants and the "producers" to include the host, crew and financiers responsible for the show. They are almost always referred to as antagonists within the scenario, given the power differential between one and the other.
8. See Olson, "Babes in Bonanzaland."
9. See Masters, "Kid Nation."
10. See Meloy.
11. Olson.
12. Hoerschelmann, *Rules* 46.
13. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 59.
14. See Kilborn, *Staging the Real*.
15. Cf Andrejevic, *Reality TV*. See also Dulick in this volume.
16. See Taylor and Harris, *Theories*.
17. Murphy, *How Television* 58.
18. Mittel, "All in the Game" 431. The show he is referring to is HBO's *The Wire* (2002–2007).
19. Firchow 145.
20. McGonigal, *Reality Is Broken* 21.
21. Think of tabletop role-playing games without character sheets or baseball games without scoreboards. Without the help of other media's frames, player engagement with game algorithims not so readily assumes the form of narrative.
22. Genosko, *McLuhan* 49.
23. Nichols, "Reality TV" 402.
24. See the Introduction of this volume for a discussion of gamespace, a description of reality as a series of framed games.
25. Nichols 401.
26. See Beller, *Cinematic Mode* 19. Beller's nuanced argument, though primarily applied to the cinema, can unproblematically be applied to television as well.
27. According to Howard: "You appear to let go.... But in fact you have more control than ever.... Advertising used to interrupt life's programming. Now advertising *is* the programming. And if you're actually being marketed to successfully, you have no idea." Quoted from Rose, *Art of Immersion* 242.
28. See Tomasello, *Why We Cooperate*.
29. "Railroading" is a role-playing game term for the Gamemaster's act of forcing the player-characters down a linear, narrow plotline.
30. As I have noted in another article, larp does not lend itself well to film documentation unless the filmmakers understand the specific exigencies of larp as a medium. Arousing interest from the viewer necessitates giving voice to its inherent spontaneity and first-person character. Pervasive games like *Kid Nation* require a similar kind of understanding of the game medium for a crew to successfully document them.
31. Björk and Holopainen, *Patterns* 205.
32. Björk and Holopainen 207. Capitalization is theirs.
33. Littleton, "Eye."

34. See Goodman, "Barbarians" for the most scathing critique of this cultural framing.
35. Elias, "One."
36. Žižek, *Violence* 13.
37. Kornberger, et al., point out to good effect that hierarchies within the West are derived from Judeo-Christian orders of angels in relation between their closeness to God and "the inevitable sin of humanity" ("The Others of Hierarchy" 64). The contemplative angels (Seraphim) sit at the top, and the active laborers among humans (Cherubim) are ranked at the bottom. The notion that inactivity and pontification are a sign of privilege and purity, whereas activity and filthy labor are a sign of lowliness and contamination. Of course, this has less to do with the running of a successful institution than with an establishment of a moral order.
38. Meloy.
39. This is with the exception of Sophia, whose cooking skills were so vital that she was allocated cooks' duties regardless of her caste.
40. Elias. According to Maria Elena Fernandez, the most dramatic adjustment the children had to make was apparently getting used to being filmed all the time, suggesting that the psychological violence committed by the omniscient cameras outweighed that of the scenario.
41. See Olson.
42. Olson 192.
43. Olson 191.
44. Huizinga as paraphrased by Henricks, *Play Revisited* 217.
45. In theory, this game should promote the Kantian categorical imperative, in that every *Kid Nation* player would then be on their best behavior at all times. The rules reflect the actual implementation in the television show.
46. For Greg and Laurel's confessionals, see Episode 5 "1Viva La Revolución!"
47. Smith, *Games* 10–11.
48. Master of Ceremonies, or Game Master.
49. Consalvo, *Cheating* 415.
50. Greg's justification for killing the chicken is obviously *not* the nutrition it will provide the town-dwellers, but rather: "20 grand is ... amazing."
51. McGonigal 270.
52. Elias.
53. For the way in which viewing reality television's own complicity in marketplace forces becomes in itself a game for the viewers, see Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 88.
54. Poniewozik, "Why Reality TV."
55. Ranciere, *Future* 6.
56. Kornberger, et al. 73.
57. As per Caldwell, *Televisuality* 262.