1
DOUBLE-UP

"YOU JUST SORT OF TAP IT — *LIKE THIS!*"

Connor's best friend, Glitch, slapped his Vid-Glove against the Potions Machine. There was a loud hiss. A bottle of Double-Up Potion shot into his hand.

"See? Piece of cake," bragged Glitch.

Behind him, the Potions Machine was still hissing. There was a *pop*, and suddenly bottles were launching into the air!

Connor dived across the floor. His arms blurred. He snagged bottle after bottle until he

had enough Double-Up Potion to fill one of the high tables next to their lockers.

"Whoops." Glitch smiled sheepishly.

Glitch's real name was Sven Svensen. He was ten years old, same as Connor. He wore a skull cap and swim-goggle glasses.

No one knew why Glitch's Vid-Glove malfunctioned. It just did.

The Vid-Glove was a sort of tube attached to every student's right or left arm. Like cell phones back home, the Vid-Glove had many uses inside the virtual world.

It could send messages. It could display maps and coordinates. It could even store items.

And not just *school* items.

With a tap, Connor summoned his Wolf Buster Sword. He knew he wasn't supposed to, but he couldn't resist. He wanted to grip the sword one more time!

His body thrummed with excitement.

Grinning, he swung the sword in the air.

He really wanted to hunt!

"No swords in the hall, Mr. Lamb," said a teacher in passing.

"Sorry, Mr. G."

Connor banished the sword back to storage. He eyed the Double-Up Potions. He tried to store a few of those, too.

BZZZ!

Connor's Vid-Glove gave a warning shake. Apparently the glitched potions couldn't be stored like regular items.

"Oh man," Connor groaned.

"Now you know how I feel," said Glitch. "My stupid Vid-Glove can't store anything. Speaking of which—" he waved at the potions, "we should probably drink these. Yeah, it's a waste of Hit Points. But I'm not lugging them all the way to Mr. Lively's classroom. There's a *troll* on that route."

Connor laughed.

Together, he and Glitch drained the twelve Double-Up Potions. A warm feeling spread through Connor's avatar, his digitized body, while a message informed him that the potion had no effect on his currently maxed bar of health.

> ALERT! Health bar already at maximum.
> Your Hit Points did not double.

Oh well. He'd expected that.

"Is it weird that this tastes good?" Glitch tossed an empty potion bottle into the air and watched it slowly dissolve. "It isn't liquid. It's pixels. We eat and drink *in a digital world.*"

"It's not *weird,*" said a girl's snooty voice. "It's a foundational law of virtualization!"

Connor's classmate, Lisa Q., wasn't even looking at them. She had her nose in a Vid-Screen, a sort of floating tablet, and was expertly tapping the screen as she passed.

"The Pfluter Principle *clearly* states," she began to lecture.

But what the Pfluter Principle stated, Connor never found out. There was an almighty BANG! as one of the classroom doors burst apart. Chunks of wood and glass skittered across the floor. The pieces dissolved as they rolled while, behind them, a slobbering creature with blazing red eyes gave a "RAWWWRR!"

Connor's heart shook.

It was a monster.

A high-level monster!

2
RANKER

DROPS OF SPIT FELL LIKE RAIN FROM THE monster's jaws. It flew forward, its blazing eyes fixed on Connor.

My sword! Connor thought.

His hand twitched toward his Vid-Glove, then stopped.

The Wolf Buster Sword was *new*. He hadn't used it in battle yet. Could he even wield it? What if he messed up?

"Stay back, kids! That's not a fiend you can handle!"

Mr. Oldentone, the school janitor, came hopping out of the classroom. He aimed a silver broom at the monster. Its long bristles shimmered like icicles.

The fiend uttered a wail. It turned to flee, releasing a thick spray of slime to cover its tracks.

Half the lockers got drenched. So did Glitch's swim-goggle glasses. And *all* of Lisa.

"How in Suu's name do they keep getting *in*?" Mr. Oldentone grumbled. He raised his broom and gave chase. But not before he flipped Connor a token.

"You mind cleaning this up, son?"

Mr. Oldentone sped off.

Connor stared at the token.

"Hurry and smash it," said Glitch, wiping slime from his goggles.

Lisa's pink shirt was soaked. She didn't seem to mind, however. She tapped her Vid-Screen and yawned.

Weird, Connor thought.

He smashed the token. A wisp of smoke lifted into the air, along with a message:

CLEANING SPIRIT, LVL 3
Type: Minion
Skills: Purify, Lvl 3; Scour, Lvl 1
Duration: 60s

The Cleaning Spirit had green eyes and a swirling mouth. It hovered between the smashed door and lockers, its mouth pulling up slime like a vacuum cleaner.

"Could you maybe clean *her* first?" said Connor. He pointed to Lisa's slime-covered avatar.

The Cleaning Spirit sniffed haughtily.

"This is Level 5 Spectral Ooze," it said. "How could removing it be that simple? I can clean the hallway, but your friend will need to soak in the waters of Lake Blessed for at least one hour in order to just barely — HOW DID YOU DO THAT?"

The Cleaning Spirit stared in amazement. The slime on Lisa's skin and clothes had disappeared. Somehow, she'd even changed outfits.

These were not skills that an ordinary student should possess!

"Did you obtain a rare Witch's Wand, by chance? Are you a *Ranker*?"

The Cleaning Spirit peered into Lisa's eyes. As a summoned creature, however, it could only appear for short intervals. Just then, its timer expired.

It dissolved.

Lisa was still tapping her Vid-Screen. "Time to go," she told Connor. "Coming? We have ten minutes and a ten-minute walk."

Connor and Glitch traded looks.

"Are you really a Ranker?" Glitch blurted out.

"Don't be silly," said Lisa. "There are no fourth-grade Rankers. Do I look like I'm in middle school?"

She smiled innocently.

Connor's eyes narrowed. With a wave, he conjured a Vid-Screen of his own. A list of VGL's highest-ranked students beamed in front of him. He thumbed across it. None of the names were younger than twelve.

Glitch was even more baffled than Connor.

"If you're not a Ranker, then how did you—?" he started to say.

But Lisa was already gone.

3
VIDEO GAME ELEMENTARY

EXCEPT FOR TELEPORTATION, THE shortest route to Connor's classroom was through the Armorer's Tent, which was a brief walk from Main Hall, where their avatars spawned every morning.

Connor and Glitch used a side door to exit Main Hall and cross the busy VGL campus.

A minute later, they reached the Armorer's Tent.

It was BURNING.

Plumes of smoke drifted over the helmets and shields on display.

"Lava leak," said the armorer. "You'll want Level 5 boots if you come any closer."

Connor and Glitch slid to a halt behind a group of worried-looking fifth-graders. Even for them, obtaining Level 5 gear was no joke.

"Guess we're taking a detour," they sighed.

"Man, Oldentone must be slacking!"

They shuffled off.

In the VGL world, accidents such as leaking lava were common. They were also ANNOYING. Especially if you were running late to first period because you spent too long drinking Double-Up Potions in front of your respawn.

"So much for the shortcut," said Glitch. "These shields aren't too bad, though." He touched a shining red one. It hissed and turned a fuzzy maroon. The armorer shot him a look.

"We're leaving!" piped Connor.

The boys backtracked until they reached a bubbling stone fountain. Jets of water shot between the mouths of snarling statues with giant hooked claws.

"Fiend Fountain," said the signpost.

It was time to part ways.

In a cruel twist, Connor and Glitch had been assigned different teachers this year. Glitch's fourth-grade classroom was nowhere near Connor's. They wouldn't meet again until lunch.

"See you after school?" Glitch said hopefully. "We can hunt mobs in Gage Woods. I'm sure I can get my Vid-Glove under control. I just need more—"

"Can't," said Connor. "I've got Swords Team after class. My first practice."

He tried to keep the excitement from his voice. It wasn't easy. Swords Team was almost the only thing on his mind. He couldn't wait till school ended!

"Oh. Right." Glitch stared at his Vid-Glove. "Must be nice," he said gloomily.

With his busted Vid-Glove, Glitch couldn't play after-school sports. Even the simple ones used Vid-Glove abilities.

"Could you hold a sword in your normal hand?" Connor asked.

Glitch shook his head. "Not that easy. You saw the shield I touched. Anyway, I should go. It's a short walk, but *some of us* have books to carry."

Glitch's bookbag bounced in the air as he left. Of all the kids at VGL, only Glitch had to equip a separate storage item.

Connor sighed. He wanted to help Glitch. But how? Even *teachers* seemed confused by the situation.

The Vid-Glove was a virtual item.

It shouldn't malfunction, right?

Connor was frowning as he departed Fiend Fountain. He felt bad for upsetting Glitch. But as he began his own, longer walk to class, turning down the hill toward Lake Blessed, his mood lifted.

He drew an item out of storage.

RUSTY SLED, LVL 1
Type: Mobility
Rarity: E
Durability: D
Awesomeness: A++

The last rank was a custom note Connor added.

But it wasn't wrong.

Wind whipped at Connor's cheeks. He was sledding downhill, gaining speed. Perhaps not *as*

much speed as he would've liked, but a slow sled was still totally cool!

He zoomed past Gage Woods, with its short trees and low-level mobs. He crossed the footpath and sped between large, jagged rocks.

Wherever he looked, he saw student avatars. Most were headed to class. Others held axes and spades, mining last-minute minerals, or slashed the air with bright weapons.

Connor gave a whoop as he passed them.

He felt heroic. Invincible!

It was amazing to think his real body was still at home, strapped into some whirring machine. "Full Immersion," the VR rig had advertised.

And the ad had been right!

Cruising downhill on the sled, he had never felt such incredible—

"Waahh!"

Connor screamed as the Lake Blessed waters erupted. A towering fiend broke the surface, showing a single bright eye the size of a minivan.

Although the eye didn't move, Connor did. He veered sideways, grabbing even more speed. The sled began to creak. Connor swerved again,

hit a bump and went flying off the sled and into the air.

He landed hard on his feet.

Down below, the empty sled hit a rock.

It exploded.

"Worth it," said Connor as the sled vanished from his inventory. He walked the rest of the way with a big grin on his face.

The VGL world was totally awesome!

Technically, VGL stood for VIRTUAL GUIDED LEARNING. But to the kids in Connor's class, and to anyone lucky enough to attend a VGL school of their own, the letters meant something else.

VIDEO GAME ELEMENTARY ("VGL")

The acronym wasn't perfect. If you said it aloud, it just barely made sense. Which was a good way to describe the VGL world. It was a mish-mash of gaming elements. Its creator, Atensoft, Inc., had even based the school on a video game it was working on.

They were always making updates.

Every day brought more killer features.

New regions. Improved crafting and battle systems. Even an increased risk of death! (Although you didn't *die*; your avatar just respawned in Detention).

Connor's smile grew wide. He reached the school building without really thinking. Only later, crossing the spinning glass entrance, did he finally remember where he was headed.

His smile faded.

Ms. Vickers's fourth-grade classroom.

As he reached the drab yellow door, a voice was already shouting, "You're late!"