



## **Heroic Play: Heroism in Mindful, Creative and Playful Participation**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores the presence of heroism in playful engagement with mobile, locative and social technologies, drawing on select ethnographies of Australian households. Heroic modalities in the data are examined in relation to mindful creative forms of play that can be collaborative or personal, socially conscious or acutely self-reflective, altruistic and non-altruistic. All modalities presented in this article, I argue, involve heroic leadership as a transformative and imaginative form of creative communication and engagement with modern technologies. The playful aspect subverts some of the more traditional views of the heroic imagination and heroic action, such as sacrifice and risk, resulting in novel and hybridised heroic modalities. As a new form of play, *heroic play* emerges as the height of transformative, mindful and creative playful participation, indicating the potential for the banality of playful heroism in the everyday.

### **Keywords**

heroic imagination, collaborative heroism, cyberhero archetype, mindful play, creative play, heroic leadership

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The infiltration of mobile, locative and social technologies in our everyday interactions and daily rituals is having a profound impact on our sense of self and sensory experiences (Hjorth and Richardson 2014). The significance of hero archetypes in popular culture, gaming and creative production in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been discussed by a number of theorists (for examples see: Ardill 2008; Buchanan-Oliver and Seo 2012; Klisanin 2012; McLoone 2010; Viega 2012). The heroic use of technologies specifically, however, and representations of everyday heroic action in online, social and digital spaces is an emerging and innovative area of research (Klisanin 2015, in press). Here, the enduring phenomenon of heroism meets the postmodern cultural playful turn. Both heroism and playful participation are powerful emerging ways of theorising everyday lived experience, its meaning, and our active participation in contemporary societies. This marks evidence for “an important interdisciplinary moment across game, Internet, and media studies at a critical point in the cultural evolution of play” (Hjorth and Richardson 2014, 14), as well as the evolution of the concept of heroism and the production of heroic narratives at large.

Playful engagement with technologies, people and our surroundings is an increasingly ubiquitous mode of interaction in everyday spaces. Drawing on select ethnographies from Perth and Adelaide households as part of the 3-year project *The Game of Being Mobile (GoBM)*, this article aims to showcase the presence of heroism in the use of contemporary technologies in two ways. First, I will explore the significant potential of mobile, locative and social technologies as creative spaces in which the conscious and dynamic act of re-imagining the self is a heroic enterprise; and second, I will consider engagement with these spaces and technologies as a form of collaborative heroic action, and a vehicle for the mindful and creative communication of personally significant and socially conscientious ideas.

These two trajectories of inquiry highlight an important distinction between the study of fictional representations of heroism, the creative production of hero archetypes and transitory non-present playful engagement with these (Hjorth and Richardson 2009) on the one hand, and the highly reflexive and deliberate identity of the user as creative practitioner, problem solver and wielder of these heroic modalities on the other. It should be noted that not all participants in the project engage with their devices, games and social media in what could be described as heroic modes of playful participation; indeed, participants demonstrate varied ways of engaging with and thinking about their devices, in frequency, style of play, creativity, and so forth. As such, for the purposes of this article, examples have been specifically isolated from the data which most effectively demonstrate this distinct use of technologies as an emerging phenomenon.

The article will begin by presenting three core concepts in the emerging literature that are relevant to the investigation of creative modes of play as heroic modes of play: the *heroic imagination* (Franco and Zimbardo 2006), the *cyberhero archetype* (Klisanin 2010, 2012), and *collaborative heroism* (Klisanin 2015, in press). The key properties of creative play and heroism will be identified through a review of contemporary literature. Next, the presence of these heroic modalities in the creative, mindful and playful engagement with technologies in

the ethnographic data is explored. The article concludes with a preliminary summary of the requirements for heroic engagement with games, social media and the Internet on a variety of interfaces. Everyday heroic playful participation is a novel hybrid space of interaction that holds interesting potential for innovative and playful forms of transformative collaborative action, critical reflexivity and creative communication.

## Emerging Perspectives: Heroism in Digital, Online and Playful Technologies

Interest in the study of heroism has made a notable return over the past decade, not seen since the uptake of Campbell's (1949) seminal work on the hero's journey as a universal model for understanding the structure of stories (Allison and Goethals 2015, in press). This new wave of scholarship is premised on an understanding of heroism as an attribute that is not limited to a privileged, special few, but "banal" – something which "seems in the range of possibilities for every person, perhaps inspiring more of us to answer that call" (Franco and Zimbardo 2006, 31). Franco and Zimbardo (2006, 32) have theorised four core features of everyday heroism in a 21<sup>st</sup> century world: the presence of "some type of quest"; "actual or anticipated sacrifice or risk," which can be discretely "physical" or "social"; a "passive or active" preservation of an ideal; and "a sudden, one time act, or something that persists over a longer period of time." The founding premise behind the idea of the heroic imagination first theorised by Franco and Zimbardo (2006) is that:

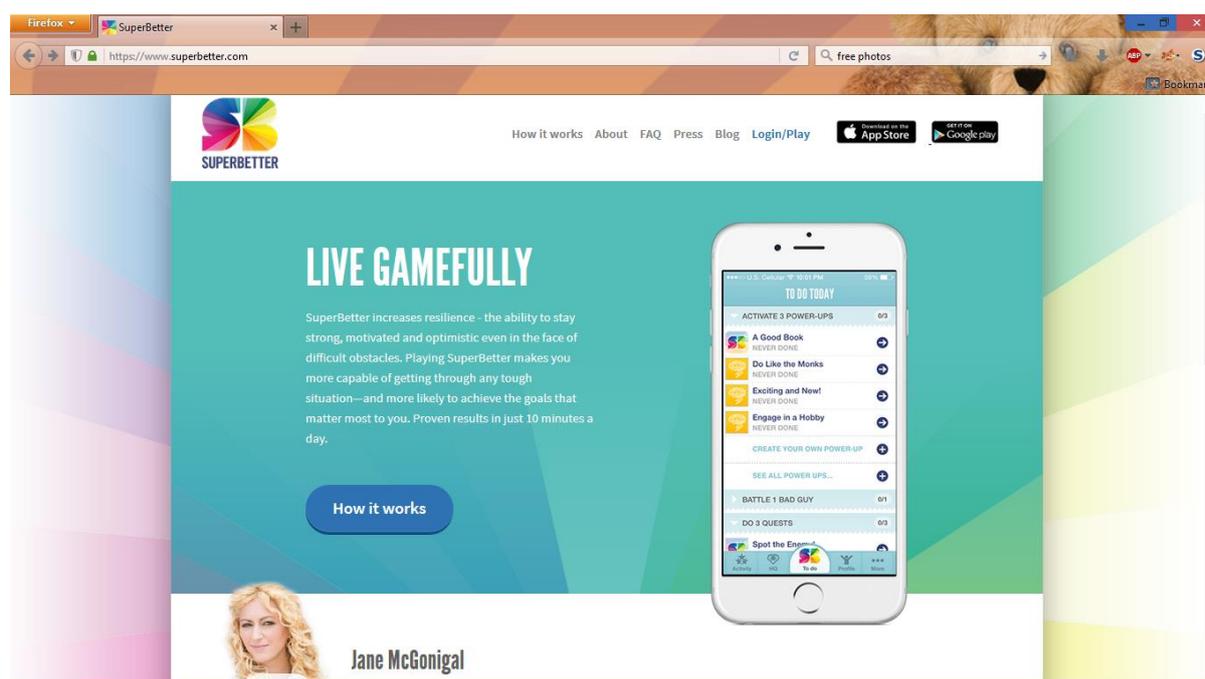
heroism is much easier to engage in if the individual has already considered some of the situations that might require heroic action, if the actor has anticipated what some of the barriers to that action might be, and if personal consequences have also been thought through and transcended at least to some degree. In this sense, developing one's heroic imagination primes the individual to take action if and when the time comes. (Blau, Franco, and Zimbardo 2009, 3).

The shaping and narration of the heroic imagination specifically in digital spaces is only just beginning to be studied. Blau, Franco and Zimbardo (2009, 4) speculate that the digital era and "our media-driven culture ... presents new situations where evil can thrive, and yet also creates opportunities for individual and collective heroic action that were never before imaginable." Klisanin (in press) concurs that this evolution in the use of media platforms means that our use of the term heroism has also evolved in its complexity and collaborative aspects.

The emerging importance of the heroic imagination is perhaps nowhere more obvious than in game design and gameplay. McGonigal (2011) champions games as fruitful creative spaces and urges us to go on our own life-altering "epic journey," aligning with the quest aspect of Franco and Zimbardo's (2006) heroic activity and the heroic imagination. McGonigal (2010) supports play as a vital means to creatively solve real-world problems. Parkhurst (1999, 18) defines creativity as "[t]he ability or quality displayed when solving hitherto unsolved problems, when developing novel solutions to problems others have solved differently, or when developing original and novel (at least to the originator) products." The creativity, self-confidence and resilience instilled by games inspires collaboration; in play mode we are the "best version of ourselves" on an epic story and mission (McGonigal 2010). According to

McGonigal (2010), the history of gaming is bound to our successful evolution as a species, alleviating suffering and resolving challenging and topical problems.

McGonigal (2010) proposes four core benefits of gameplay: “urgent optimism” to tackle a problem immediately with assertiveness; a sense of being intimately connected to a “social fabric,” building “bonds and trust and cooperation”; “blissful productivity”; and “epic meaning” found in “human, planetary scale stories.” These “superpowers” result in the definition of gamers as “super-empowered hopeful individuals ... who believe they are individually capable of changing the world.” McGonigal (2010) boldly asks: “Are we on the threshold of our own epic game?” and, by implication, a novel hero’s journey as a human species? Finding out how to translate this super-charged intrinsic playful motivation into real-world contexts is the driver of McGonigal’s (2010) research. Her game designs are an innovative and interactive means of instilling the heroic imagination and preparedness in everyday individuals in the face of issues such as the oil crisis and global extinction, resulting in a transformative experience. Her 2012 game *SuperBetter*, for example, aims to build essential life skills such as coping with mental illness, facilitating recovery from physical trauma, and building resilience; the game incorporates themes that are central to a real-life hero’s journey as first postulated by Campbell (1949), centred around overcoming challenges, perceiving the self as a hero, and drawing strength from allies. Heroic play is thus a form of *creative* and *planetary-centred* problem-solving.



**Figure 1**

*SuperBetter*, ‘SuperHero’:

Gaming as a means of playing out our own hero's journey in the everyday

The ubiquity and infiltration of playful participation in our everyday lives is giving rise to new social, digital and other forms of expression of human activities. One distinct such novel expression is the emergence of *cyberheroism* as the most “dedicated” form of digital altruism; this marks “the first incarnation of a new archetype: the cyberhero” (Klisanin 2012, 1).

According to Klisanin (2012, 18), cyberheroism is a sustainable form of playful participation that can foster the personal and collective heroic imagination in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In her exploration of the emergent phenomenon of *collaborative heroism* through three social media initiative case studies, Klisanin (2015, 1) argues that “just as interactive technologies and social media have profoundly impacted the social, economic, and political spheres, among others, so too are they impacting the mythic and moral spheres—giving rise to a form of heroism described as collaborative.” These are “digital altruists” who take their creative and interactive use of technologies one step further (Klisanin 2015, 3). The core distinction between digital altruism and cyberheroism, according to Klisanin (2015), is that digital altruism involves concern for another but does not require long-term commitment, or repeated action. Further, collaborative heroism involves accomplishing “noble goals” that have worldwide consensus; this is defined in terms of collaborative actions that aim to accomplish the Articles of the United Nations, Universal Declaration of Human Rights and/or Earth Charter (Klisanin 2015). It requires dedication and involves the sum total of collective actions taking place in the matrix of the cloud. Klisanin (2015, 14) concludes that the “data cloud has become a situational factor in our lives submersing individuals within an interactive matrix where clear dividing lines between action in the ‘cyber’ world and the ‘real’ world disappear.” This nascent research supports the rise of a collaborative form of heroism, the ripple effects of which can be felt far and wide in real time.

It must be noted that both traditional and emerging theories of heroism<sup>1</sup> incorporate the presence of risk or sacrifice in the heroic act, when life and limb is on the line. This is an important distinction from theorisations of play and creativity. Andersen (1994, 81), for example, describes play as the arch conduit and harbinger of creativity: “the process of play gives us energy, focus and creativity.” Andersen (1994, 81, 82) argues that “play depends on two rudimentary ingredients: safety [or “psychic” safety from “the harshness of reality”] and stimulation.” For “pure play” to be present certain sub-determinants must qualify (Andersen 1994, 81). In terms of safety, play must be “episodic,” “freely engaged” and have “*risk-free* ramifications [emphasis added]”; for stimulation, play must involve “uncertainty,” “the use of *personal strategy*” and “revolve around power” (Andersen 1994, 82-84).

The confluence of play and heroism is likely to subvert the properties of each of these activities in their pure form, resulting in a *hybridised* form of playful heroic engagement with contemporary technologies – I will discuss this aspect in forthcoming sections. One key outcome of location-based and networked interaction is the generation of “hybrid spaces” of interaction and presence (de Souza e Silva 2006). Frith (2012, 250) describes these as “spaces that merge social connections, digital information, and physical space.” In everyday heroic playful participation, the emergence of hybrid spaces involves the reduction of risk involved in the play to a certain extent. This is potentially accompanied by the toning down of the other components of heroic activity, but still necessitates their presence in some degree or form which would otherwise not be present as pure creative play. Klisanin (2015, 4) notes this crucial distinction in a technologically grounded form of heroism: “There is a seeming lack of risk involved and an ease of engagement—that flies in the face of our traditional conceptions of heroism” as a result of the collaborative nature of the Internet. Heroism in playful participation must, after all, still be *playful* to some extent. In the following two sections this distinction will be examined in light of ethnographic data and our participants’ engagement with the heroic imagination and collaborative heroism.

## The Heroic Imagination in Mobile, Locative and Social Play

A creative mindset is integral to identity formation; practicing a future-oriented approach by heroically imagining “alternative future scenarios that might play out” (Franco and Zimbardo 2006, 34) is an important aspect of heroic engagement with modern forms of play. Markus and Nurius (1986, 954) first theorised the notion of “possible selves” as a representation of “individuals’ ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming, and thus provide a conceptual link between cognition and motivation.” Parkhurst (1999, 14) notes the position of the “widespread nature of creative abilities” – not limited to traditional ‘creative’ pursuits but as a mindset – and its concordance with wellbeing. In his exploration of creative communication and practice, Crouch (2007, 108) notes that Habermas’ idea of communication implies mindfulness; “one is aware of one’s active role in the construction of meaning” (Crouch 2007, 108). The inclusion of the heroic in mindful intrapersonal and interpersonal creative communication and identity formation has novel implications for the role of contemporary gaming practices and playful participation overall.

Some participants in the *GoBM* project revealed the convergence of critical reflexivity, the creative use of devices, resilience and the heroic imagination, as exemplified in the following two accounts based on interviews and observations.

Patrice is a 52-year-old single mum and government employee from Perth. She dreams of being a farmer and an artist – her use of mobile, locative and social play is a representation of her engagement with her heroic imagination. Her kitchen is strewn with hand-written inspirational quotes and self-affirmations. The collection of photos on her tablet’s *Pinterest* boards (e.g. “Kitchen,” “Vege garden,” “Photography,” “Renovating,” “Art”) helps with her household design and renovations – her home is literally an artwork in progress. Being a single mum of an 8-year-old boy, imagining a more positive and productive future takes courage and resilience in the face of financial, time, work and family constraints, whilst working at maintaining her physical wellbeing on a daily basis after a recent bout of ill health.

Patrice is actively ‘dreaming’ her ideal self into reality in a very embodied way, through the use of her hands with her sketches, flicking through inspirational photos and articles on her tablet, and using them as resources. She uses her phone and tablet to research and schedule appointments with suitable workmen, and is physically working to create her dream home from the ground up. Collecting photos for her *Pinterest* boards and browsing free sites such as *Shutterstock* is a fun, easy and playful way of getting quick inspiration. When she sees a photo that inspires her she makes a basic drawing in her sketch book and a layout plan, and breaks it down into more detail. There is a degree of risk (emotional, financial and otherwise) involved in this process; *not* in the space of play – which as Andersen (1994, 81) suggests must provide “psychic” safety – but in daring to visualise and create a better future, with mobile and other technological spaces as vehicles. The tactile interfaces of her Samsung tablet, in particular, and her iPhone, together with the hand-drawn sketches of her inspired designs become containers of her heroic imagination. They are fluid, creative, mindful and resilient spaces in which the self is re-imagined.

Belle, a 36-year-old university student from Perth, is learning how to play the electric guitar again after a 10-year hiatus, with the interactive gaming guitar tuition interface *Rocksmith* on her PlayStation 3. While playing (and in off-game time when watching other *Rocksmith* players upload their in-game recorded tracks on YouTube as a source of inspiration and tutoring),

Belle confesses she often imagines herself being on stage as a competent guitarist. Belle used to be an active singer-songwriter and guitar-player. Music was an integral part of her life growing up and in her early years at university, and in defining her identity and rebellious spirit against her traditional upbringing. She abandoned play, and much of her mindful creativity, coming out of university as the adult responsibilities and financial challenges set in. Belle partly jokes and laments that this was her dream as a teenager, noting the sense of loss she always felt when she did not play for a long time. The game has given her licence to assume creative ownership, and has come at the right time, as she is now becoming a professional author and researcher; *Rocksmith* is complementary to this overall creative and playful re-shuffling of her everyday lifestyle. Notably, Belle mentions that she has had to “fight” for the emergence of this space in her social, domestic and online spheres – the unfolding of her heroic imagination is a very conscious, deliberate and assertive choice.



**Figure 2**

Playing the heroic imagination in *Rocksmith*

Both Patrice and Belle are using their devices, whether it is their tablet, phone or PlayStation, as a means to embark on a Campbellian personal quest, as is definitive of the heroic imagination and the hero's journey. They are a reflection of an everyday hero's journey as a personal epic quest to redefine oneself, and instances of the “productive process of ‘self-actualization’ ” (Giddens 1991, cited in Crouch 2007, 107). Their embodied engagement with these devices is a vehicle of initiation and crossing the threshold into a new imagined reality and an improved version of themselves. Indeed, as Klisanin (in press, 20) notes, “as we move further into the future—of wearable, augmented and virtual realities—we will increasingly be required to recognize the *digital environment of our extended mind as part of our embodiment.*” Patrice's and Belle's *Pinterest*, PlayStation (and other) user accounts and domains become a “digital representation” of themselves, “an avatar” which allows them to “create a new identity for oneself, while in reality remaining the same person, [which] mimics the dual-persona and shape-shifting characteristics of the superhero archetype” (Klisanin in press, 20). By occupying both the ordinary everyday and the possibility of extra-ordinary heroism in the domestic and cyberspace, they embody the cyberhero archetype as an instance of a hybrid space between “the real and the imagined” (Klisanin in press, 20).

Notably, at least in these early stages as indicated by our participants' stories, the heroic imagination does not necessitate an altruistic motivation or the desire to shape a better world, but rather a commitment to "the development of a personal heroic ideal" (Franco and Zimbardo 2006, 31) to shape an improved self-identity, whatever that may be. This is highly "situational and personal" (Franco and Zimbardo 2006, 31; Klisanin 2015) for every creative and conscientious user and gamer. Further, in both the above cases, the risk is associated with setting up the conditions of a lifestyle that can incorporate this playful participation, through resilience in the face of life challenges leading up to the play – rather than the play itself – and the ongoing resilience associated with continuing to exercise their heroic imagination. This preliminary phase of heroically re-imagining the self is a representation of our participants being "heroes-in-waiting" (Blau, Franco, and Zimbardo 2009, 4). Here, the creative and playful use of the PlayStation and tablet to re-imagine the self makes heroic play a very distinct mode of heroic expression.

Our two participants go one step further in their use of these devices in the home than regular play – they are actively demonstrating *heroic leadership* (Allison and Goethals 2014) in their creative interactions and intentionality. Heroically led playful participation is centred on the inspired, energized, imaginative and transformative (Allison and Goethals 2014, 2015, in press) creative use of technologies. Transformation is a key property of the heroic process that we are only just beginning to appreciate the depth of (Allison and Goethals in press). Observation of domestic mobile gaming and other playful practices in the *GoBM* project to date, has revealed three distinct but interconnected and fluid modes of attention and creative communication in play: transitory non-present or 'time-filler' play, mindful gameplay, and mindful creativity. Each of these denotes from lowest to highest respectively, the degree of reflexivity and mindfulness – or modes of attention and distraction – within and between social, digital and/or physical (or hybrid) spaces. The evidence for heroic leadership in the upper modes of mindful creativity suggests the presence of a fourth category of mindful mode of attention as the height of playful participation – *heroic play*. Heroic play is transformative play, during which our identity is re-shaped through our purposeful and resilient embodied interactions in the everyday.

The collaborative, risky and pro-social aspects of the heroic imagination and the use of hero archetypes with personal devices are explored at greater depth in the next section.

## The Cyberhero Archetype, Collaborative Heroism and Mindful Play

The distinct term 'mindful play' is beginning to inform our understandings of gaming practices. Twitter pages by [Games for Change](#) and [Global Gaming Init.](#) are promoting the notion of mindful gameplay which is already starting to infiltrate our discourses of play. These conceptualisations of mindful play are centred on "[t]he separation into games for 'fun' and games for 'change' [which] has given new life to the exploration of serious 'real-world' topics in game making" (Dutta 2015, 2). Dutta (2015, 7) advocates the concept of mindful play as an "alternative methodology for game design in the service of activism and outreach," creating spaces for "play as conversation, [and] play as consideration." *Cyberhero League*, "an interactive gaming adventure with real world consequences" currently in development, is an example of such novel forms of mindful play that encourage the proliferation of the cyberhero archetype in a seamless blurring of online and offline worlds (Klisanin 2015, 2). *Cyberhero League* spurs players to go on a series of quests or activities to collect historical and cultural

artefacts hidden in locations around the world. Victory unlocks treasure in the form of real world aid for people, animals and at-risk environments, fostering heroic and playful engagement with the everyday.



**Figure 3**

*Cyberhero League:*

An innovative style of playful, mindful and collaborative heroism

When we speak of mindfulness in practices of play we may refer to the degree of intentionality, presence and engagement with the activity of play. In the emerging phenomenon of collaborative heroism, any individual who uses social media platforms and online/digital networks “to act on behalf of other people, animals, and the environment ... in the peaceful service of achieving humanity’s highest ideals and aspirations, e.g., world peace, social justice, environmental protection, and planetary stewardship” is said to embody the cyberhero archetype (Klisanin 2012, 7-8). Australian ethnographic data from our *GoBM* participants reveal instances of this heroic and mindful play in service of a noble goal. To ascertain the presence of collaborative heroism in participants’ practices with their use of technologies, Klisanin’s (2012) “Cyberhero Questionnaire”<sup>ii</sup> was used as a guide.

Doug is a 71-year-old university lecturer from Perth. He does not play games but is a very mindful and conscientious user of his devices. He often shares YouTube clips, website links and research articles on issues he cares about with his vast network of local and overseas scholars, professionals, colleagues and relatives as useful resources – although they vary in topic, all these resources are aimed at elevating the consciousness of his contacts and inspiring his network, a property that is integral to collaborative heroism (Klisanin 2012) and heroism at large (Allison and Goethals 2014, 2015). Importantly, he uses the online world as a vehicle for championing causes he cares about and to galvanise support. Recently, he kick-started a campaign on the Australian fundraising site [Everyday Hero](#) in which everyday citizens can promote noble causes they are passionate about. Doug created a supporter page for the 2015 Perth to Busselton Charity Bike Ride. The website allows contributors to post

updates, images and videos of what they are doing and share these with friends on Facebook and Twitter to help get the word out, as well as include a personal story why they are supporting the cause. This creative storytelling reveals an instance of collaborative heroism and mindful play as an act of transformative creative communication.

For the sixth year, Doug is part of a small but dedicated group of riding enthusiasts who will jump on their bike and cycle from Perth to Busselton, all raising funds for Western Australian children in need. This is not a competitive race, but an event that allows people to enjoy the Western Australian countryside in a friendly environment while raising funds for [Variety](#), the Children's Charity of Western Australia. Organised and led by a volunteer committee, all funds raised from this event go towards the Variety Freedom program, for the provision of equipment to children and young people in need, such as wheelchairs, modified bicycles, specialist car seats and more.

Doug's account is an exemplary modality of heroic play – it is collaborative heroism in action, in which both the fundraisers and contributors collaborate in an online environment to make a positive change in and transform their local community. Klisanin (2015, 14) argues that “[c]ontemporary expressions of heroic behavior are manifesting in a collaborative form—seamlessly bridging the online and offline worlds.” Doug's heroic participation with technologies is a prime example of collaborative heroic play that is both engaged with the online environment (through the website Everyday Hero, Doug's smartphone or laptop at home or on the move, email communication with his network and social media, the playful monitoring of the website to tally up the donations made so far) and offline environment (a scenic bike ride across Western Australia with other supporters of the cause and caring everyday citizens), toward making a positive contribution to the lives of disabled and disadvantaged youth. In this sense, Doug embodies the cyberhero archetype by way of his Everyday Hero profile. Notably, any risk associated with this act of collaborative heroism is mitigated by the playfulness of the activity online and the physical world.

Stephanie is a lecturer in computer science and a doctoral student in Adelaide. She is part of a close-knit network of scholars and uses her social media accounts, namely Twitter and Facebook, to share interesting and useful information with her colleagues from around the world. Stephanie is conscious about the use of social media, especially Facebook, becoming a dumbed-down form of communication because of “critical mass.” She champions the use of social media as a means to defend important causes. She notes, for example, that Twitter is becoming “a good forum for mockery as a political weapon ... Mockery is key ... when people are doing politically outrageous stunts.” Stephanie uses her Twitter account to inspire and educate herself and her international network on current affairs and social issues, for example when “things go wrong with a marginalised [people], or people who are ... just not reported in the mainstream, in the white peoples' mainstream media.” This reflects the epistemic – through the sharing of educational and informative material – and energizing – by inspiring social and global awareness and action – functions of heroic leadership (Allison and Goethals 2014, 2015). She creatively manages the content of her various lists on her Twitter profile, once again demonstrating cyberheroism as creative content sharing and storytelling. As we will see, this creative and mindful use of her Twitter cyberhero archetype may have been one of the catalysts for fostering her heroic imagination, priming her “to take action if and when the time comes” (Blau, Franco, and Zimbardo 2009, 3).

In a poignant example of her use of Twitter as a vehicle to not only educate herself and her network, but to speak out against injustice, she accounts an instance of using Twitter in defence of her friend and colleague, a humanities scholar in England, who was ‘trolled’ by a famous scientist on Twitter. Stephanie saw this as a blatant attack against “postmodernist thinkers.” She admits being deeply offended and angered by this event, and could not simply stand by and watch it unfold. During this period she showed her support by re-tweeting a number of conversation strings between her friend and the scientist. More importantly, she sees such attacks as intolerance of intellectual diversity in academia, and ignorance of the hero’s journey many scholars have faced from all walks of academic life: “how do you get to be so advanced in your field, without looking at people, in that field, and realising they’ve had the same arduous journey as thinkers. How do you not acknowledge [this]?” she comments bemused.

This is an interesting case study of collaborative heroism in respect of the presence of risk or suffering – it suggests that simply having a Twitter account and putting one’s ideas out there is risky business in and of itself. This is especially the case for public or intellectual figures, or those with a great number of followers, who are at greater risk of personal attacks and harmful comments. Stephanie’s heroic leadership in stamping out Twitter trolling and defence of her friend is a negotiation of heroic meaning and a prime example of a Twitter profile as an embodiment of a cyberhero archetype – in this sense, through her regular critical and dialogic engagement with the communicative act in the social media space of Twitter, Stephanie is actively and mindfully participating in heroic play as a conscientious and altruistic form of content and meaning making, resulting in the generation of everyday heroic social media spaces.

Another Adelaide participant, Stacy, is a further example of these early stages of engagement with cyberheroism. Stacy is a limited technology user – but a mindful one. An academic editor, Stacy is a supporter of environmental causes. She published a book on her thesis based on alternative agrifood movements in community gardens, demonstrating the conflation of creativity, the heroic imagination and noble causes. She comments: “I feel, things like, television shows, especially for very young children can kind of fill up their imaginations in a way that things like books and engagement with nature and engagement with people and the community don’t do.” She encourages and fosters the use of mindful play, creative leadership and “self-directed interest” with technologies in her 8-year-old son Luke. Stacy laments on the lack of quality communication on Facebook, and the profile she has set up recently. Although she is not a fan of social networking, Stacy regularly contributes to blogs or community organisations and follows a select group of bloggers whose values align with the definition of collaborative heroism offered by Klisanin (2015), in taking collective responsibility for the stewardship of the environment. Two in particular fit the profile; the first is a blog associated with an urban farm, and the other on a project to restore a piece of land.

Patrice has also engaged in Internet activism on a regular basis in the past two years; she has signed Amnesty International petitions, with a special focus on third world, human, children’s and women’s rights. When asked if through using the Internet in these small ways to help others she feels she is making any difference, Patrice remarks affirmatively that she certainly hopes they are:

It's sending it to a government body, or the political leader of that country ... it's bringing awareness that there's people outside that area that are against what they are doing ... who do not condone their behaviour and they are petitioning against it.

She receives email alerts when a petition for a cause comes up that matches these areas which she is most passionate about. She follows blogs such as "[grateful in april](#)" on the website of the [m.a.d.woman foundation](#), which is dedicated to helping Australia's most vulnerable and needy individuals. Patrice shares the uplifting monthly blog content with her contacts through email. At work, she helps motivate the younger staff who feel pessimistic about their career advancement in their small organisation by sending them informational online content, such as the Forbes questionnaire on what they want to do with their life to help them hone in on their career passion. Through these small acts of everyday online kindness and digital activism Patrice feels "a sense of worldwide community," affirmative of Klisanin's (in press, 1) definition of collaborative heroism as centred in a "planetary consciousness."

Simone is a 21-year-old gamer from Perth. Her gaming experiences reveal important insights into the gendered aspects of the online gaming community, and how a digital avatar can transform into a cyberhero archetype to combat online sexism and gender discrimination. Simone finds multiplayer games quite "stressful" – as a female gamer she has experienced discrimination when she has revealed her gender to other players. "I have been treated 'special' because I'm a girl, but also where I've been criticized because I'm a girl," she says. She adds: "I'd be overpraised when I did things right and 'babied' for things I did wrong." Simone admits how difficult being a female gamer is: "it feels really weird to have to justify that the reason I'm playing badly in a game is not in fact because of my gender but just coz I'm playing like crap." On the opposite end of the spectrum she observes: "I have found that in games where I have played exceptionally better people are very uncomfortable with losing to a girl." She plays *Call of Duty* and *League of Legends* online frequently, which are overwhelmingly male dominated games. She notes that her friend Tye tries to talk about her "in gender neutral terms" for that reason, especially in an online environment where "everyone just assumes you are a guy." Her avatar, in that context, becomes sexualised.

Simone notes that in most games she tends to not reveal her gender. However, this changes when sexist and discriminatory comments are specifically being made against women during gameplay. Simone will break her gender silence in those situations, immediately identifying herself as a female and addressing the derogatory comment. When she was part of a group of online gamers in *League of Legends* she set rules for game-appropriate behaviour and etiquette by not allowing sexist and homophobic terms during gameplay, such as "fag" or "faggot," "slut," "rape" and "don't act like such a girl" (in this extreme example, the term female itself becomes derogatory), regardless of how irritating they found it initially. This course of digital activism stamped out the group's habits as they gradually swapped these for more gender-neutral terms – this becomes in some respects a form of collaborative heroism practiced over regular periods. It inspires and encourages other like-minded players to grant support to Simone and her team's stance, although she admits it is not common.

Simone's in-game character or avatar gives her the freedom to stand up for gender rights in gaming, leading the way in changing ingrained discriminatory practices in a very specific context, reflecting the importance of the situational aspect of everyday heroism. This example

of heroic play involves all the necessary ingredients of play in “uncertainty,” “the use of *personal* strategy,” and power (Andersen 1994, 82-84) – Simone’s *League of Legends* cyberheroism turns the powerlessness of the female gamer avatar into a ‘superpower,’ by using it as a positive force to ameliorate a situational and broader social injustice, and effect positive change in the online gaming community.

This particular example of collaborative heroism reveals the presence of risk in online gaming – when directly asked if Simone regards the use of her cyberhero archetype and stance against gender discrimination as risky, she adamantly responds “yeah, all the time.” Simone describes herself as a “social justice warrior,” although she notes the negative connotations associated with self-identifying as such and the risks associated with it:

I think it’s important to stand up, because it can be quite scary to stand up, when you’re in the minority ... and I think a lot of women are intimidated by the backlash; I think anyone would be, to speak up and just be attacked by every single person around you ... I think it’s important enough that it’s worth it.

Simone comments that it takes a certain amount of resilience to take on that role over an extended period of time. Resilience is a core attribute of heroism (Allison and Goethals 2011). She explains:

I’ve had (male) friends who have stopped thinking of me in the same way ... I do feel like it’s risky because a lot of the time, if you start speaking up about that you’ll be labelled as a feminist, which is a really bad thing where male games especially are concerned. They have that stereotype of feminists in their head where they’re dirty, ugly women, who hate men ... that we already have equal rights ... and feminists just want women to be the superior gender and they won’t stop until they are.

Identifying as a bisexual female, for example, Simone recalls how personally hurtful it felt when she has been called a “faggot,” something that would be used against her in-game if she made this public. She comments: “men don’t say to other men gender specific insults ... I get the ‘bitches,’ and the ‘slut,’ and the ‘whore’ and that kind of stuff.” Support of her activism is rare, and being “ganged up on by multiple people” is the norm.

By voicing her opinion and actively using her avatar as a means to stamp out these biases Simone takes a great personal risk by irreversibly changing the nature of her relationships and interactions, which can come at a cost of ending friendships. She notes how a conversation with another friend made her realise that if standing up for what are “basic rights” causes her to lose a friendship then she should not be friends with them in the first place. As such, even though she feels like she is exposing herself to criticism, mockery and ignorance, she has voluntarily and actively continued to stand up for what she believes in for the past three years to effect a positive change in gaming culture, regardless of the risk involved – the very definition of everyday heroism (Franco, Blau, and Zimbardo 2011). Simone’s creative and playful engagement with technologies reveals the specific use of hero archetypes and fantasy style play to re-imagine and re-invent the self, and build life resilience.

There is one interesting departure of note from Franco, Blau and Zimbardo's (2011, 101) definition of heroism and Simone's cyberhero archetype; once again, the playful aspect subverts the condition of no "external gain anticipated at the time of the act." In *League of Legends* a player can obtain four badges of honour, which reflect heroic attributes and noble goals in the avatar's moral character, including "helpfulness," "honourable opponent," "good team-mate" and "friendliness." Clearly, her online activism against gender discrimination is done wilfully and for its own reward; however, the playfulness of her engagement introduces the incentive of in-game trophies and accolades as part of the online heroic universe.

Our participants' stories in this section support the view that games, social media and the Internet are creative spaces that make us better. They encourage us to take our own personal quest that helps us grow and become more skilled at resolving important personal and social issues in creative and transformative ways.

## Conclusion

Participant accounts presented in this article indicate that everyday Australians are, to a certain extent, creatively using technologies to re-imagine and re-invent themselves and their environments, both online and offline. Insights garnered from this article are obviously drawn from a limited number of participants; further directed and systematic research will need to be conducted to determine how widespread these practices are. Nonetheless, these are emerging examples of how people are beginning to embody the cyberhero archetype in their everyday lives, through the very tactile, strategic and imaginative use of their personal devices. The heroic imagination is a skill that can be cultivated over time. The socially and morally conscious property of the heroic imagination appears to be more pronounced in its collaborative modalities. Heroic forms of play can be conducted in both a collaborative *and* a highly personalised mode; Patrice's sharing of her *Pinterest* boards, for example, can raise awareness of the beauty of nature, art and an eco-friendly lifestyle in heroic collaborative mode on the one hand, as well as a stylised and self-affirming vision board and library of ideas on the other.

Heroic play is not necessarily altruistic, socially conscious and risky due to the subversiveness of its playful aspects, as discussed. But the connecting rod of these heroic modalities is that they are *transformative* – in all expressions of heroic play the user-as-creative-practitioner and heroic leader creatively asserts and crafts her identity, whilst educating, inspiring and energizing herself and others, producing transformations of consciousness and a self-awareness as a human being in a larger network.

Based on the emerging literature and the ethnographic data, we can surmise that the requirements for the heroic use of technologies are: strategic and volitional decision-making, intentionality, critical and reflexive thinking, social and planetary consciousness, originality and creativity, a degree of risk or departure from the psychic safety of play, and resilience. At its height, heroic play incorporates all the above properties. Heroic players are active heroic content and meaning makers in the locative, social and mobile spaces they move within, in and out of the home.

The diffusion of play, technologies and heroism in everyday lived experience showcases these as examples of specific situations in which our participants have engaged in heroic playful

participation in their mediums of choice, either intermittently or continuously over prolonged periods of time, and for a variety of motivations. The context of their heroic play drives the expressions of their heroic activity, resulting in the engagement with a specific interface as a “situational factor” (Klisanin 2015, 14). This makes these heroic modalities connected forms of creative collaborative action in their inherent nobility, yet distinct at the same time.

Ethnographies explored reveal how our engagement with technologies is creating novel opportunities for individual and collective heroic participation. Everyday spaces become situational opportunities for us to mindfully engage with our devices, our social media profiles, the Internet and the games we play, in ways that advance a heroic mindset. The playfulness of these activities can make facing the risk associated with the act of cyberheroism easier, if we choose to not reveal our true identity for example, yet in other ways can be just as hurtful and detrimental as negative physical interactions. Regardless, practicing heroic leadership in playful, creative and mindful modes of attention can make our engagement with technologies a heightened, richer and more fulfilling experience.

If enacted with enough rigour and frequency in daily routines these practices could become ritualistic and habitual, resulting in the *banality of heroic play* (a play on words on Franco and Zimbardo’s 2006 “banality of heroism” postulate). The domestic space is momentarily transformed into a heroic space through these intentional and very specific interactions, forming a new kind of hybrid space. This is not only determined by the physical/digital, but the everyday/heroic, real/imagined, risky/playful, socially-conscious/self-conscious. Heroic play is the ‘heroification’ of playful participation.

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<sup>i</sup> Though not all: see Allison and Goethals 2011, 2014, in press.

<sup>ii</sup> See Appendix 1.

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## Appendix 1: Cyberhero Questionnaire (Klisanin 2012)

- 1) I believe my life is interconnected with all the life forms on our planet.
- 2) I enjoy acting on behalf of people in need regardless of their age, race, ethnicity, religion, or gender.
- 3) I have engaged in the following forms of Internet Activism:
  - Created or Signed Digital Petitions.
  - Clicked-to-donate.
  - Answered questions that resulted in a donation to a Cause or Charity.
  - Played games that resulted in a donation to a Cause or Charity.
  - Used Search Engines that donate a portion of revenue to a Cause or Charity.
  - Shopped at Websites that donate a portion of revenue to a Cause or Charity.
  - Posted something positive, or uplifting, on-line about other people, companies, institutions, or charitable organizations.
  - Posted informational content on-line for the purpose of helping others.
  - Used the Internet, or mobile phone to donate to a Cause or Charity.
- 4) I use the Internet to act on behalf of more than one “cause” or “charity”.
- 5) I do not think the needs of other people are as important as my own needs.
- 6) Through using the Internet to help others, I am contributing to conditions that promote peace in the world.
- 7) When I click-to-donate, or sign on-line petitions, I feel a sense of unity with all the other people who engage in these activities.
- 8) “Clicking-to-donate” cannot have a significant impact on a cause, even if a lot of people click each day.
- 9) The Internet does not enable me to help others more than I could without it.
- 10) I am being pro-active when I use the Internet to support the needs of other people, animals, or the environment.
- 11) Will you please share the main reason(s) you engage in digital activism?
- 12) Will you please share your age range?
- 13) Will you please share your gender?
- 14) Will you share your race?
- 15) What country are you from?