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GAME OVER GIRL

Naomi Gibson


READING GUIDE



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GAME OVER GIRL

BY NAOMI GIBSON

SYNOPSIS

After the death of her mother, Lola is sent to live at Leighton Boarding School, an exclusive boarding school full of privileged kids. She doesn't know who has paid for her place. Her sister, Alex, has an anonymous benefactor and remains in their family home.

Lola is enrolled in a test group for a super-realistic VR game called Better Than Life, where you can create anything you like in a private world of your own. Lola constantly reminds herself that her mother died in a train crash, but on a phone call her sister Alex hints that Lola does not remember the events properly. Lola never knew her real father but has an imaginary dad who is her best friend.

The creator of Better Than Life, Dr Zats, warns Lola not to recreate real people or places in her game. Lola breaks both rules and first recreates her family home with a lift that can access multiple levels. Lola is frightened of what she has subconsciously hidden on the basement level. She creates her imaginary dad and learns he can give her real comfort in her VR world. Despite this, a scream follows her in the game and grows with intensity, eventually shattering her VR house. Lola regularly finds metronomes and broken martini glasses, prompting memories she tries to ignore - and the basement level in the lift is constantly lit up.



Lola also recreates a boy in her class, Sebastian, who is the adopted son of Mr Leighton, the headmaster. Lola bonds with Sebastian after discovering his mother is also dead. When she finds him unconscious, Mr Leighton blames her, and Lola grows closer to Sebastian's VR replica. Mr Leighton threatens to expel Lola if she skips more lessons, but she ignores him. She spends increasing amounts of time with Sebastian in the game, and begins to suspect he is more than a VR creation. The real Sebastian is transferred to a specialist hospital and remains unconscious.

Meanwhile, Alex regularly appears in Lola's VR world covered in blood, and their mother also taunts Lola from afar. She is increasingly frightened of what she has hidden in the basement level of her house. Lola attempts to face her fears by recreating her mother's funeral, but it doesn't feel right. Lola confronts VR Sebastian and learns he has uploaded his consciousness into the game to escape the life he hates with Mr Leighton. Lola continues to be plagued by a scream and broken martini glasses begin to show up in the real world. Her grip on reality begins to slip.

Lola breaks into the IT lab and learns the horrifying truth about who her real father is – Mr Leighton, which explains her place at the school. This prompts her to go to her VR basement and confront her worst memory and the truth of what happened in the past: Lola killed her sister and her mother was sent to prison for the crime. Interactions with Alex throughout the book have all been imaginary. Because of this, Lola is sent to a psychiatric hospital.

Some time later, Sebastian rescues her, revealing that she is still in the game, trapped in her basement level. He takes her to his own level and explains she can now live in the game like him. He returns to the real world, promising to come back once his issues with Mr Leighton are resolved.

When Sebastian does not come back, Lola attempts to return to the real world with catastrophic consequences: she is trapped inside Sebastian's body. We realize Sebastian has now inhabited her body instead.

The point of view changes to Sebastian, where we learn his real motivations and how he manipulated the game to his own end, to escape the life he hated. On TV, Dr Zats explains the experiment and praises VR as a form of therapy. She hints that all is not lost for Lola, prompting Sebastian to worry about repercussions.



WHAT THE PUBLISHER SAYS ...

'I've always loved creating my own worlds full of wonder, imagination ... and sometimes even the scary things it's hard to face in real life. Because it's just pretend, isn't it? That's what makes it all OK. But in Naomi Gibson's masterful tale of fractured memory, the main character builds a virtual world to hide something very real. Something even she might not be ready to face ... and things definitely aren't OK!' **BARRY CUNNINGHAM, CHICKEN HOUSE**

AUTHOR BACKGROUND

Naomi Gibson was born in 1988 and grew up in Cheshire, UK. Her childhood was spent with her nose in a book and her hands on a sketchpad, constantly in search of adventure and new worlds. Encouraged by her family to be creative, she developed a love for writing at a young age – something that never left her. She studied Art History at the University of Manchester. Whilst there, she met her husband, someone who continues to tell her all about the latest advancements in AI, space, and consumer technology, even when she's not listening. She is the author of two novels for young adults, *Every Line of You* and *Game Over Girl*.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

'Game Over Girl stemmed from my fascination with people and the lies they tell themselves because the truth is too difficult to bear. I've always wanted to write an unreliable narrator, and paired this with my interest in virtual reality and how VR could be used to explore someone's subconscious. When I was around 16 I went to the Tate on a school trip and saw Michael Landy's 'Semi-Detached' – an artist rebuilt his semi-detached family home (life-size) within a room in the Tate. This was something that stayed with me for a long time and I often wondered what events and memories had taken place within that house that prompted the artist to cherish it enough to recreate it. These ideas went on to form the premise of my book: a girl who harbours a dark secret plays a VR game, and in that game she recreates her house. Every level within her house has a memory – something that happened to her – and she locks her secret in the basement. The game eventually lures her down to the basement, where she learns a shocking



truth.' NAOMI GIBSON

THEMES

- Unreliable narrators
- Family relationships
- Technology
- Control
- Obsession
- Guilt
- Anxiety
- Creativity and the power of imagination

WRITING STYLE

The novel is written in first person narrative, past tense – this personal style of storytelling reads as a recount of events, giving the reader insight into the thoughts and feelings of the main character, Lola. Naomi Gibson's writing is compelling and absorbing, combining mystery, romance and thrills seamlessly. **320 pages, 36 chapters, ages 14+**

PUPIL ACTIVITIES

1. AI and virtual reality

In *Game Over Girl*, Lola is selected to test out a brand-new VR game, in which she can build her own reality and escape the real world.

As a class, discuss the positive and negative aspects of this opportunity – what danger might this cause? Who could benefit from having an alternate world to live in? What risks can you think of? Write these all down on a



big spider diagram and add to each point as the discussion develops.

Then, on your own, design your very own VR game. Think about the type of activities and tasks that might be available to players and how this might benefit them within the game. Who is your game aimed at? What is it called? What incentives does it offer? Once you have decided on these things, create a poster to advertise your game and stick it on the wall, presenting your game to the class.

2. Dealing with grief and emotions

Lola uses the game to explore suppressed emotions and the grief she feels at the loss of her mother.

On your own, think about why this might have been helpful for Lola when it comes to reflecting about the way she feels. Could it be because she is able to reconnect with her mum/sister? Or maybe because she can reflect on her past at her own pace? Make a list of the possible reasons why Lola may have found this cathartic.

Once you have written the list, share your answers with the person sitting next to you, and discuss how you might use these reasons to understand your own emotions going forward. How might you use Lola's experience of recognizing and dealing with her grief to find your own coping mechanisms?

3. Creativity and the power of imagination

'Welcome to Better Than Life.'

'Woah.' It was exactly like being in a rainforest. How was this possible? Mother never let us have phones or a computer. I had no idea games could be so ... real. I thought they were played on a screen or involved a controller. This was exactly like being there. There were plants and flowers I'd never seen before. The light was a colour I didn't know it could be. Unseen monkeys called to each other and a snake hissed in the nearby undergrowth ... 'So this is happening in your head, in your mind?' I asked. 'That's right,' Dr Zats said. 'Kind of like a lucid dream. Have you ever been able to control a dream before?' (pp29-30)



We are first introduced to the VR game Better Than Life when Lola is chosen to take part in its trial.

On your own, re-write this as if you were playing your VR game for the first time – what would you be feeling? What could you see? Use as many senses as possible to help describe your surroundings and the way you could be feeling in that moment. Try to be as detailed as possible to make the reader feel as if they are right there with you. Then, read this aloud to the person sitting next to you.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do you feel about the way Lola ignored the orders to not replicate real life within the game?
2. What does the story suggest about privilege – do you think it exists around you? How so?
3. In what ways can you tell that our narrator is unreliable?
4. VR technology plays a crucial role in this book. Do you think this kind of advanced technology will eventually become a reality? Do you think that's a good or a bad thing?
5. Do you think it's fair that Lola is given a place at the school just because her father is the headmaster?
6. In what ways do you think this book comments on mental health? Give some examples.
7. What comments does the novel make about family relationships and how they differ from family to family?
8. What do you think happens next, after the end of the story?

