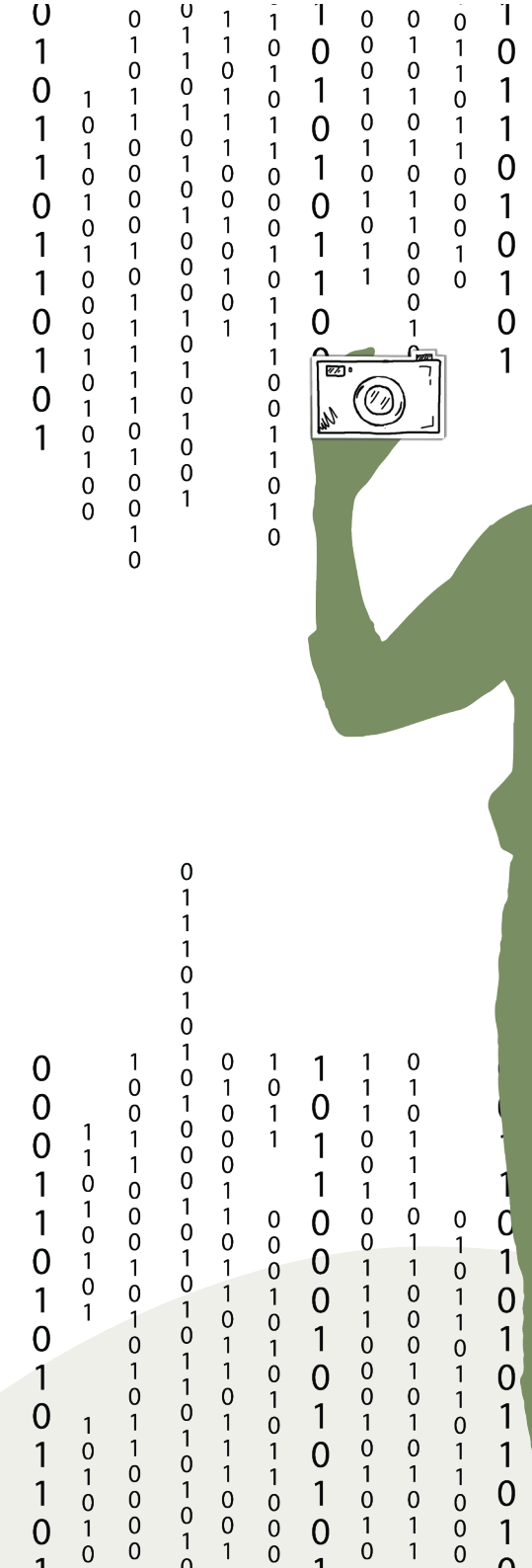
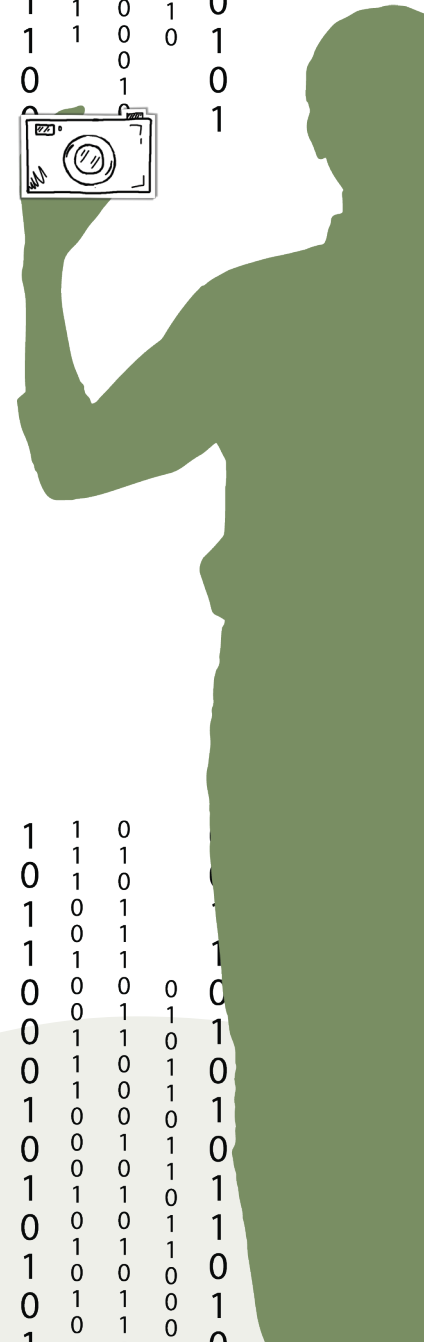


# THE GREAT AUSTRALIAN <VIRTUAL> RACE



### Chapter 3

At first, you don't see Ruby when you walk into her darkened room. You can't see anything except the glow of an enormous monitor sitting on her desk. As your eyes adjust, you see her silhouette in front of the screen.

'There's a guy with a crown beside me,' Ruby says, calmly.

'What? Where?' you ask. There's no one else in the room.

'Calm down bro!' Ruby says, aggressively.

'What do you mean calm down? You're the one yelling!'

You move closer to where she is sitting.

'How did you get over there? Did you slide through?' Ruby asks.

'What? Ruby, no. I didn't slide through. I just walked through the door and-' You reach out and touch Ruby's shoulder. She screams and spins around in her swivel chair pulling off her headset, leaving her character to fend for herself in some other dimension.

'You scared me half to death!' she yells at you.

'Yeah, well you were talking about some guy with a crown. You were freaking me out!'

Ruby turns back to face her monitor and quits the game she's been playing. She flicks the button on a desk lamp and light fills the room. You both blink to adjust.

'You are seriously addicted to that game, Ruby.'

Ruby shrugs. 'It's a whole lot safer than this competition you've got us into.'

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'What?' you ask.

'I know what this is. I know this encryption. It's just a simple cipher. And if I'm right, this button should ...' Ruby clicks and the game begins.

.....

'You know what's weird,' Ruby remarks as she pushes the keyboard away. 'When I'm online gaming we all have usernames, tags, handles and avatars. I've never really thought about it before, but those things are like our personal symbols. It took me ages to choose my username and build my avatar because I wanted them to say something about me without using my own name or photo.'

'Yeah, you're right,' I agree. 'And our national symbols are a way for us to say that we belong to Australia without having to say it with words. When I wear my green and gold scarf, the colours do the cheering.'

You sit in silence for a while.

'Oh wait! I almost forgot,' Ruby suddenly exclaims. Her fast fingers are on the keyboard again. A new window on the screen is filled with numbers and letters that mean nothing to you.

'Wait, that can't be right,' Ruby says.

'What?' you ask, only half listening. You assume she's checking her game stats.

'When the message from The Hacker appeared, I launched an IP address tracking tool. It's pretty basic but I managed to trace the address The Hacker was using. But here's the weird part...'

You're listening now.

'The Hacker's IP address is the same as the competition IP address,' Ruby explains.

'So that means ...' you say hesitantly, not quite understanding yet.

'That means,' Ruby continues, 'that The Hacker and the

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competition are using the same local network. which means—'

You cut her off, finally understanding. 'The Hacker is part of the game!'

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