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Polybius

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Polybius

KATELIN BRANHAM

ENG 4830: Advanced Fiction Writing Seminar, Spring 2018

Nominated by: Dr. Erin Flanagan

Katelin Branham is a student in the college of Liberal Arts. She intends to become an author and editor later in life. For now, she enjoys reading, writing, and (of course) video games.

Katelin notes:

I've always been interested in urban legends. For a long time, I had the idea of a kid running into the mythical arcade game, Polybius, but never put it down on paper. A song inspired me to put a twist on the point of view, and the story took on a life of its own.

Dr. Flanagan notes:

This story brought me back to my video-game days—the roll of the joystick in my twelve-year-old palm, the smell of adolescent sweat, and the dizzying belief the game was out to get me. Now I'm wondering if that might have been true. Branham's story delves deep into its main character's consciousness to extract complicated questions about competition and friendship, the relationship between humans and technology, and the chilling question of what it means to be alive. Branham trusts her readers to keep up and crack the codes of the story, and what we're rewarded with is both a wild fantasy and a nightmare. Keep your coins in your pockets, kids. This one will turn you upside down.

Polybius

The only two people I ever really cared for were the manager and MLY. Everyone else just moved past in a slow parade of faces staring into my own. Few stood out. And among those, even fewer impressed me enough to remember--and think of--during those long busy summer days and vacant nights.

One of the first kids I met that made an impression came around right after the arcade opened. His name was NOA and he had serious, searching dark eyes. His hands, smooth and wide, seemed to have been made for analog sticks and that poised rest position between buttons I always saw in the kids, the ones who were naturals. And NOA was a natural. He was great at Galaga, fantastic at Frogger, the best at Berzerk, and just really, *really* good at Duck Hunt. The younger kids would follow him from game to game watching him play when he came around, and he was cool about it. Maybe that was why I started to hate him.

I tried to challenge him more than I did other players. He handled each curve expertly, with grade schoolers piled around him the way pigeons would crowd a park bench. That was when I put it together--all those kids were following him, talking to him, paying attention to *him*. That wasn't what I wanted. But NOA kept coming back, each time growing more nonchalant about how good he was at every game. That was the first time a player ever made me angry.

The next time NOA came around was one of the last. Kids would always pull him towards me; I was popular, rightfully so. Other games had flat colors and cartoonish illustrations, but the neon eye and nerve decals on the sides of my cabinet almost glowed, even in the middle of the afternoon, and never faded. Even the smart kids, the ones who knew that toxic creatures were marked by nature with unnaturally bright colors, were drawn in. NOA was smart before all that happened--but he didn't respect me like I felt he should have, so when he came around to play again, I showed those dark searching eyes of his something secret behind my screen.

After that he stopped scoring so well. Eventually his hands shook so badly he could hardly put a quarter in the machine right. By the end of the summer he wasn't even able to play Centipede--not without trembling and getting a migraine bad enough to make him retch. He never came back after

that, and eventually his score dropped lower and lower on my leaderboard until it was erased entirely. Maybe if NOA had been more grateful for his skill with video games I wouldn't have had to do that to him.

“Where’s your big brother, Caden?”

“He’s home sleeping. Mom said I shouldn’t bother him.”

“All he does is sleep anymore. I wish he’d come back and show me how to get two ships in Galaga again.”

Another time I had to do something like that but not with a player--it was with another game. I’ve never doubted or questioned my popularity. It was my due, and was a comfortable constant, even as they wheeled out the aging and unpopular games and replaced them with newer ones. But across the aisle from me was Frogger. Frogger, with its stupid tie and briefcase. Frogger, that made the kids screech with laughter every time their friend’s frog was flattened. Frogger, with its turtles and logs and traffic that *somehow* managed to be more enticing than me--but only sometimes.

So one morning as the old man unlocked the place and got everything ready, I stared Frogger down. It looked blankly back at me, unfazed. I sent a thought out into the floor through my power cord and it wormed its way through the wires back out into Frogger’s chassis, and the screen started to warp. It flashed once, twice, and smoke began to leak from the service door on its back. The manager only noticed when the panel burst open with a bang. He never knew much about how to actually work on arcade games--he only knew how to make change quickly and how to lock and unlock doors. All he could do was put an out of order sign on Frogger’s monitor. He didn’t know that I had been the one to kill it. And I hadn’t even needed a car.

“Dude, where’d Frogger go?”

“I dunno. Who cares, that’s a baby game.”

“Yeah but I had the number four high score on it.”

For a couple summers after that, things were just fine- idyllic, even. The manager smiled at kids and pumped quarters out of his moneychanger in return for dollar bills, and if he accidentally counted wrong and gave them an extra one nobody seemed to mind. They brought in a pinball machine. Berzerk and Rampage and Pole Position got moved out, taken somewhere I never had to worry or think about. They brought in Street Fighters and X-Men and Battletoads to replace them. After watching those for a few days, I made my own 2-player mode.

Some older kids would swear I didn't always have 2-player mode. They were right, but to them it didn't make sense that an arcade game could create its own software independent of that ingrained in it during manufacturing. But I could, and I did, almost every time someone played me. I think that was why I was so popular, among the many other reasons--kids would come and play and find the levels changing as they went through them, changing purposefully. I was intent on seeing who could think on their feet and who couldn't. There were no patterns like in Galaga--just entry stages to gauge my player's skill and then the real game. 2-player mode was much the same.

"Man, I spent all my allowance trying to win the crane game."

"At least you get an allowance. My parents don't give me jack."

"So you can't let me borrow any? I wanted to win that dog for Sadie."

MLY first came to the arcade the same summer Atari's Batman game did. She didn't have any interest in that, though. She liked the skill crane--or maybe she liked looking at the prizes inside. All the kids did, though none of them could get the trinkets outside of their smudged plastic prison. MLY was no exception. Looking back, I don't think she was particularly good at *any* game. But when she first stepped up to play me, I saw her hand fall back to that familiar resting position. Her marble blue eyes were wide, gaping even, snatching up every pixel I put on the screen. And I was glad. I was always happy when a kid narrowed their focus down to me exclusively, but now I was *gleeful*.

She was bad at it. She was incredibly bad. I didn't know her name for weeks. But that didn't stop her, which was what I loved. She kept coming back even though she lost every time. And every time she lost, her score was a bit higher. Every time she made it a bit farther. I think I was more excited to see her getting better at it than she was. But she was excited too--I registered that she had a gap in her teeth. She wore ribbons in her hair that were pale blue like her eyes. I'd never had a favorite before, but once she came around I did. And the day she beat the tenth highest score on my leaderboard I learned her name: MLY.

The kid whose score had been knocked off, JAX, wasn't very happy about it. No kid ever was. But that was fine, because it would make most come back again and again to try getting that coveted spot back. Kids were predictable, and that made my life so much easier. I felt untouchable in a way; their success was completely on me. They were lucky I was so fair about

everything- didn't they realize how easy it would have been for me to make them all lose the first stage, to just rob them of those precious quarters? My saintly generosity has to be among my best traits.

"Haha, dude, you got knocked off the board by a little girl."

"Shut up! At least I can get onto a board in the first place."

"Yeah, Mickey. The only thing you're good at is picking your nose."

Then along came JME.

"Man I hate that kid. But I wanna watch him play."

"It's hard to see 'cause he's so tall. Plus his butt sticks out."

"I changed my mind."

JME played a lot, and he was good, but he lacked the tact that NOA had once had. I suppose I liked him, but he seemed like nothing to me. He was not dexterous. His eyes were dull. Blunt. Hungry. They ate but they didn't taste, and they *never* gave thanks for their meal. In hindsight, I should have seen all that earlier. But I was too preoccupied with his scores to give it much thought. One of my few mistakes I'm humble enough to admit.

He was coarse, but maybe I'd just been spoiled by MLY, who always went right for the bathroom before playing any games to wash her hands. JME didn't seem to be on very good terms with soap, and he had a gangly frame that seemed to impose itself on a lot of the boys in the arcade eventually. MLY was short in comparison; so short that if she were any shorter, she'd need a stool to play. She looked up at my screen, but JME looked down, hunched over my cabinet as if he were taking a test and was bent on preventing others from peeking.

JME didn't care about JAX's score getting knocked off, and he didn't care when MLY went on to take out BRD and JWB. JME had the three highest scores on my board (29,870, 28,560, and 26,990) and paid no mind to a little girl who had just broken seventh place (with 16,960). Maybe he saw it as beneath him. Odds were he was too dumb to notice any change that didn't affect him. As he blundered up and down the aisles, I was happily tracking MLY's progress in the game. That must have been what pride felt like, pride in something other than yourself, anyway. I liked it. I liked it a lot.

"That game over there keeps giving my quarters back to me."

"Which one? Polybius?"

"Yeah. It sucks. I wanna play it."

Even though MLY was easily my favorite player, I never made my game easier for her. That was my favorite part of the whole thing, anyway, ratcheting up the difficulty to see which players could handle the heat and which ones couldn't. It was a test of reflexes and wit, and seeing MLY succeed made me happy--a feeling that, until then, was by and large unfamiliar. When she lost she never shouted or stomped, just furrowed her brow in thought and then wandered away. And when she came back, whether it was in half an hour or the next day, she never made the same mistake again.

I'll admit I started feeding quarters back to some kids, ones that I remembered were no good at my game. I didn't see it as a particular loss. If they were going to get better, they would have by now. And besides, they'd still use the quarters, just at other games, so there was no need for the manager to be upset at all. Between you and me, I don't know why he wanted those quarters so badly if all he did was give them back to kids the next day. But it wasn't his job to make sense. All he had to do was unlock the doors for kids to come in and play.

"Nuh-uh, that game's weird. I hate all the eyeballs."

"I think it's cool. I hope they make like a movie or a comic book about it."

"Maybe they will. So weirdos like you can go see it."

JME noticed when MLY took off his third place score. He was angry. I, on the other hand, was elated. I played the fanfare for her twice and caused little bursts of pixels on the screen, like fireworks. She was smiling and pumping her fists in the air. Some other kids congratulated her, too; there tended to be a line by my cabinet. It was good, and I was proud, and I reveled in these new feelings I had unlocked through MLY. It was so much better than being mad, like I had been with NOA. I thought it would never stop.

But JME came up; it did.

"How'd you do that?" He said to MLY, astonished that someone else could be good at video games.

"I just play it a lot." She shrugged.

"Well so do I!" He said, and turned back to me.

I saw MLY stick her tongue out at his back and was filled with a new kind of mischievous delight. I thought about it the whole time JME played, until I noticed what he was doing.

His thick eyebrows were in a tight, tense line and stayed that way the whole time he played. And one by one he started to knock every other score off the board. After my screen lit up the neon green HI SCORE! above the counter, he'd lose on purpose and then start again. I thought he couldn't keep it up, but he did- according to the kids watching, JME "mowed lawns," so he had a lot of quarters. Then I felt an old familiar anger. Did he think this was a game? Well, maybe it was, but it was my entire life, and I wasn't going to just let him erase other people's hard work because he was mad at a little girl.

After fishing around in his jeans for another quarter, JME put it in the coin slot. He had a stupid look of confusion on his face when I gave it back.

"Oh it does that to me all the time!" A kid in back said.

"Not me!" JME said.

I gave him his quarter back again and again, and then he did something that I had only ever seen happen to other games: he kicked me in the side, and I was consumed with a glowing white rage. I switched to the high score table.

"What the hell?" JME yelled. He gripped my molding with his big sweaty hands. I kept showing him the high scores. All of his names were gone, every one- even the ones MLY hadn't beaten yet. She was on top, with nine other kids who'd been knocked off prior.

"What the *hell*?" He repeated.

"Hey," said a kid who had pushed their way up. "There's my old score!"

It was indeed their old score. I glared the screen at JME, daring him to do something. I wanted him to, for some reason. I wanted a kid to test me, like NOA had, but worse, I wanted him to actively fight me. I wanted to put him in his place so the other kids could see what happened when you got greedy and ungrateful and mean like that. I wanted to make him into an example.

But he walked away, shoulders hunched and fists in his pockets. He went to gather his equally greedy ungrateful mean friends. I didn't give anyone else's quarters back after that.

"Think you can make a little kid steal the keys off the old guy's belt?"

"Sure. He's like asleep on his feet. Why though?"

"Because I want the keys. And I want you and Donnie to be in the alley tonight."

I was right. No surprise there. He came back. No surprise there, either. I told you kids were predictable. JME and his two friends snuck in about two hours after the manager locked up. He didn't seem very troubled by his missing keys; he had spares, after all. But JME had keys too, now. When I saw them come in and sneak through the mausoleum aisles of dead gray screens, I was glad.

First they unlocked the coin doors to Super Mario Bros. and Street Fighter and filled their pockets up with quarters. I didn't know what they were saying, but I heard their whispers and incessant snickering. I waited for them with a sort of patience only I could have. I never moved much in my years at the arcade, so I'd say I'm good at waiting.

"Course he's not gonna notice. We'll lock the door again."

"I guess we can just come tomorrow and leave the keys for him to find."

"Yeah, like the men's room. Jamie, what's the bat for?"

When they came near, I saw JME was holding something long and blunt. It was dented in spots, and had a dull metallic shine to it. I waited to see what he was going to do. He raised it and swung at my monitor. It bounced off with a noise I could feel in my diodes.

"Jamie, what the fuck?"

"Dude look, you didn't even crack it!"

"Well I'm gonna."

JME stopped before his second swing connected. All three of them blinked in the light of my screen when I turned it on. It was only the title screen--electric blue letters and a bleached white eye shot through with red veins. The iris was hot magenta. My theme played loud and harsh in the cemetery of the arcade. JME swung and hit my speaker grill as if to shut me up--but there was no one else around to hear me. There was no one else around to hear them.

JME, I said. Simple white on a black field.
“Those are your initials, dude!”
YOU THOUGHT YOU COULD BEAT ME.
“What the fuuuck.”

I saw something in JME’s neck move as he swallowed. His dull animal eyes were wide. There was the sound of plastic complaining as I pulled in the cords from cabinets around me. We were all plugged into the same power source- but only I needed to be on right now. They didn’t have to see this.
“What was that?”

JME didn’t respond. His eyes stayed on my screen as I pushed myself off the ground. A pillar of wires from the other games held me up, as a snake’s body would its head. One kid screamed, the other turned to run and bashed his knee against Super Metroid’s cabinet.

GAME OVER JME.

“Oh my god.” He finally said--just before my cord wrapped around his neck.

While JME hung there, clawing at his neck, I looked up to find the other two boys. I didn’t want them getting out. I didn’t have anything personal against them, so I decided I wouldn’t kill them, but I would give them a good fright. I sent a cord out to find the power strip set in the floor two aisles over.

JME kicked. His eyes bulged and strained, and his face was turning an interesting shade between red and purple. I decided I hated the feeling of his neck--like wires wound together with a greasy covering and some kind of reinforcement stuck between the two. Is that what humans were, after everything was said and done? Machines full of faux wires with not-steel supports and something like oil running through them to keep all their joints moving smoothly?

I thought on this as JME acted out his last struggles. I stared carefully at him, and he stared back, eyes beginning to gloss and spit running from the corners of his mouth--a scientist out in the field, squeezing their specimen too hard between their forceps. I decided humans were not like the immortal machine. I broke JME’s neck too easily and cast him down, like the skill crane would carelessly drop one of its stuffed prizes.

When I found the outlets in the other aisle, the cabinets on that side of the room blinked back to life. They wailed out snatches of their theme songs as I made their screens grow brighter and brighter. The older ones burst first, sending out showers of glass like sharp sparkling confetti. The smell of melting plastic and warping metal emerged, and the smoke that coiled from the broken games was black.

The cord I had used to kill JME went to find and drag back his friend who had been crawling away. The other was hiding behind the counter--why he hadn't run I didn't know--but I was glad. I grabbed him up as well and brought them both back to me. I leaned over the two, and my screen was only showing them a wide, unblinking eye. The smoke clouding the ceiling was blotted with my magenta glow. The smoke alarm didn't go off--had the manager forgotten to check up on it, or could it be that it was connected to the same power grid as the games?

In the reflections from their eyes I saw myself bounced back, between bursts of screaming static and unnamed colors and shapes non-Euclidean in nature. It was the closest to a mirror I had ever gotten--I saw myself staring back in their impossibly wide eyes and I thought I looked very good this way. When I was done looking at myself I tossed the two kids down amidst the broken, now burning, cabinets, and picked JME back up. Then I let the smoke alarm come on. The sprinklers followed shortly after--when I remembered we had them.

They attributed the fire to the two boys who survived, despite neither having tools for arson on them. They'd set the fires for fun, the chief fireman supposed, and then gotten trapped when the fire spread too fast. They were lucky to have been pulled out when they had. The trauma and the smoke inhalation had all but killed them. They both had been burned badly; one would only say "Jamie," when asked what happened; the other stayed curled up and shaking. He cried and covered his eyes whenever the lights in his hospital room were on.

It was a good thing the manager had taken insurance out before he lost himself, everyone agreed. He could afford to replace most of the games that had been lost--and the carpet on one side of the floor. Thankfully the other half of the arcade hadn't been touched. But kids always complained that the place still stunk of burnt plastic and what they assumed to be metal. The manager might have recognized it, but he doesn't do much anymore except

stare at the wall. He never came near my cabinet. He never opened up the back panel to find JME, who was doing a funny sort of contortionist's act inside. Bones bulged in his neck and his thigh where I'd had to twist him so he could fit.

MLY still has the number one high score.
