

## The Wasserman Kids

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“800 dollars? 800 dollars and they’re not even real?” Said Mr. Wasserman. “I can’t believe this. My kid spent 800 dollars on fake shoes.” He paused for a moment, taking in the fact that all three of his kids were looking up at him from the couch. “And don’t think you two are off the hook. I’m sure you’re in on this, too.”

Mr. Wasserman’s anger was directed at Elijah, his 13 year-old. Next to him on the couch was Tamara, younger by a mere year-and-a-half. And then came Ezra. At 6, he was half the age of his elder siblings. “They’re not fake, dad,” Elijah chimed in, defending what his parents considered an egregious purchase. “There’s an actual license agreement. The copyright makes them real Jordans. And just because they’re in the game doesn’t mean I can’t wear them, that’s dumb.” He was testing his luck. “My character gets to wear them. It’s actually pretty lit.” Mr. Wasserman didn’t know exactly what he was talking about, distracted by his son’s impetuosity. Rather than pony up the cash, Elijah had laid a sound argument at his feet about intellectual property and authenticity. Was this how Nike sold sneakers these days, thought Mr. Wasserman. He’s really always been this annoying.

Mr. and Mrs. Wassman’s reproachful tone did not earn the undivided attention of their children, in spite of the consequences they all faced. Behind them, on the the TV was the menu screen for Real Skate SF, PS4’s latest multiplayer skateboarding game, which the kids had pooled their savings to buy. A floating icon prompted players to select a character and there, looking back them, were Elijah, Tamara, and Ezra, characters they had spent the last week meticulously crafting into mirror versions of themselves. Elijah wore a Supreme t-shirt and a pair of Adidas track pants, though his thick pair of safety glasses suggested that one day his attire would be replaced by suit and tie. As a sharp rebuke to the streetwear her brother had selected, Tamara’s

character was dressed in a pair of Dickies and high-top Vans. Her greasy mop of hair draped over her shoulders. Ezra's character was dressed in the same ragged 49ers jersey he wore everyday. Here were the Wasserman kids, in the game as in life.

"We don't want to hear it," said Mrs. Wasserman. "The point isn't the brand, the point is the 800 dollars. We don't understand how you managed to spend that much on something you can't actually touch—wouldn't you rather save up and buy a pair you could wear to school?" She paused, noticing that 3 blank expressions stared back at her. "We said you could get the game, because we thought it was a skateboarding game, and that it might get you excited to use the skateboards we got you last year for Hanukkah."

Elijah, anticipating his parent's anger, calmly reached for the controller. "Mom, you have to understand. That's not what the game is about. It's about the culture. I actually think you would like it." It was not the first time that Elijah sounded like he was about to pitch his parents on a new startup—the way Silicon Valley had seeped into their children's speech, the way the hustle had insinuated itself into their behavior and understanding of the city disturbed Mr. and Mrs. Wasserman. They would have already moved to Santa Cruz or Portland had they not locked down such cheap rent in the late 90s. They were some of the only holdovers from that time on the block.

"Look, you could skate, that's one way to think of the culture, but there's other stuff, too. I actually spent most of my time at the Cartoon Museum." Mrs. Wasserman, who has a painting studio in the family's garage, rolled her eyes at her son's obvious ploy to butter-up his artist mother. Elijah was entertaining, at least, an expert imitator of the showmanship he had seen in the tech showcases at his school. Mrs. Wasserman let him continue.

“I remembered you guys taking me there once a long time ago. I remember thinking it was really cool, all the old cartoons like from when you were kids. I wanted to show Tammie and Ezra, since they were too young to go, and mom was still pregnant with Ezra.” There was a hint of flattery to Elijah’s delivery, an attempt to elicit some sympathy from his parents through a bit of nostalgia. By the time his character arrived at the museum, he had credited the childhood trip as the inspiration for his future in sneaker design. “All those old cartoons had the best costumes, the sickest footwear,” he added, losing himself in the thought of sneakers. “Shoes like those Jordans are like a textbook, a template I’ll use for the rest of my life.”

This was not the first time the Wasserman kids were arguing competing agendas. Last year, the family had taken a tour of the Tartine bakery, and each child made their parents listen to start-up pitches for their future baking businesses. The parents’ investment took the form of cookbooks purchased from the giftshop, but by the following day, the kids had already forgotten their baking enterprises. It happened over breakfast: rather than bake something themselves—pancakes, even—the kids demanded Entenmann’s donuts from the corner store. Still, Mr. and Mrs Wasserman listened.

“It’s Rube Goldberg,” Elijah explained to his parents, “he was an old cartoon guy, even older than you guys.” He led his parents through an interactive exhibition, which animated the cartoonist’s absurd designs. His character flicked a plunger to start a conveyor belt, a contraption, in turned out, that was actually powered by a rat held over a candle. The menacing machine had the unlikely use of changing a baby’s diaper. In another room, a choir, a sea lion, a sumo wrestler, and a large, cartoon set of hands formed a compliance designed to draw a foot bath for some ailing patient.

Tamara couldn’t stand her brother’s museum tour. Everyone in the house knew about Rube Goldberg—it was an obvious choice. Their parents built real-life reproductions of these

harrowing mechanics while they were art students nearly two decades ago, and though they received praise at the time, they stopped production after a citation from animal control caused a crisis of conscience. The children knew all about their parent's artwork, had been raised in the studio, and more than once had endured a screening of *Beautiful Losers*, for which both of their parents had been interviewed, though they only appear in the bonus features. But the ruse had gone on long enough. Tamara saw that they were one step away from going to the interactive Mark Gonzales mural, and god forbid she would have to listen to her parents praise what she felt was a bogus idol. Justice had to be served.

Invoking the quickness and precision of a sibling who always has to fight for her turn, she swiped the controller from her brother, immediately directing the character to exit the museum. "Why don't you show mom and dad what you were really doing," she said to her brother, a statement clearly meant to get their parents' attention. They watched the character approach a large group of people on the street. "I'm sorry mom and dad, but I don't think you're getting the whole picture," she explained to her parents. "Why didn't you show them what else you did on your visit to North Beach." Before long, the group of people resolved into a long line. There were kids waiting with their parents, Japanese couples, kids carrying skateboards, and middle-aged business men who paired a suit with expensive sneakers. "Oh my god, you got a pair," said a guy wearing a fleece Patagonia vest. Mr. and Mrs. Wasserman had stood in lines like this with their son, lines long enough to contemplate a deep, existential question about the nature of parenting. They didn't even have to look at the sign to know their son's character stood outside San Francisco's flagship Supreme store.

Before they could let their disappointment be known, Elijah blurted out, "But mom, dad, I didn't even have to wait that long. The line in the game is so much shorter than in real life, plus I could go by myself this time, you didn't even have to wait with me. I saved you all this time." He was right, his parents could not tell him it was too dangerous to go by himself—their actual son was

in-body sitting safely at home. They also could not tell him it was a waste of time—they had been able to attend their friend's mural unveiling at Twitter HQ, indulging in more than one microbrew during the event. But as Elijah continued his defense, even the alcohol couldn't numb his parents to their his brazenness. "I mean, because I charged the shoes, let's just call it even for babysitting the little ones."

"You self-satisfied little schmuck." As Mr. Wasserman chased after his son, Mrs. Wasserman noticed that he had left his phone behind. Her son's Instagram account was still open, and she looked at the most recent post. It was a screenshot of her son's character crouching in front of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, captioned "They should put me up in here." She was astounded to see the post received 12,405 likes and over 200 comments, most of which consisted of crying emoji, strong arm, "100" and "dead", but other strangers showered her son with praise: "You are the true work of art" and "the mona lisa of shoes #23". When Elijah realized his mom was looking at his phone, he ran back to the living room, and snatched it out of her hand. "Look at those numbers, though," he said, simultaneously refreshing the post to see his most recent tally. "Give it a month and I bet they give me another pair for free."

Tamara watched as her parents untied the web her brother had spun for them. She was used to her older brother's behavior. How many times had she seen him pull similar stunts for the sake of attention—clearly, he knew that he would get in trouble spending 800 dollars at Supreme, but Tamara did not share his metric for value. To her, social media scores were not worth the money or time her brother invested in them, and to some extent, she even felt bad for her parents, that Elijah had cost them so much money for what she also considered to be a frivolous enterprise. Not that she was concerned with the authenticity of the shoes—real or imagined—rather, she couldn't stand how her brother kept them in the box, even in the game.

As her Elijah continued to justify his actions to their parents, Tamara switched to her own character and watched some of her favorite playthroughs. Her younger brother Ezra, who sat quietly through his brother's proceedings, was now watching his sister's character skate through the streets of San Francisco. Tamara was extremely adept at the game, and had amassed a following via Twitch and YouTube, where her followers watched playthroughs of Real Skate SF. In fact, hers were some of the most popular. What made her videos so enticing was the purity that could be found in the skating. Her style was powerful, and the camera angles she selected emphasized the grace at the heart of her character's abilities. But at the edges, discernible mostly as a feeling of tension or drama, was Tamara's open taunt to her audience (and to her older brother). She knew she was this good, a quality that had attracted invitations from every part of the culture, from skating with pros to judging femme and non-binary skate contests. Mostly, though, Tamara left her DMs on read.

The playthrough that she and Ezra watched had been recorded a few days earlier. She had strung together a line at Chinabanks, a notoriously challenging spot to skate. Even in the game, a strict security presence only left a 15-minute window to skate at any given time, but scrambling against these obstacles, she successfully filmed a line that no one had ever done, not in the game, not in real life. And to celebrate her triumph, she turned the comments off. The argument with Elijah was not over, but Mr. and Mrs. Wasserman were soon distracted by what they saw on screen. They had both been skaters—Mrs. Wasserman was even sponsored during her early 20s, and competed in a few X-Games. The kids had trouble imagining their parents bombing hills in San Francisco, and roll their eyes whenever their father says, “your mom was the female Tony Hawk.”

Mr. Wasserman took a seat next to Ezra, and Mrs. Wasserman sat sukhasana on the rug. Elijah leaned against the wall, adjusted his hat for a selfie, and continued to look at his phone. Style was just as important in the game as in real life, and Tamara would often repeat tricks for hours

before submitting her playthrough to the forums. Yet, at the end of this clip, Tamara included a slam. It had been an intuitive decision—there was the sense of process and risk that it brought to the footage, but there was also something about her character’s body collapsing over a handrail like a discarded banana peel, and its slow tumble down the rest of the stairs, that elicited an uncanny feeling in her, motivating her to leave it in. Her parents, both familiar with skating’s trials and difficulties, did not think anything of the fall, though both cringed when they saw the character’s dazed expression after hitting her head on the bottom step. Ezra merely smiled. “Is there one with less—with less damage?” Asked Mr. Wasserman.

“Why don’t you show them the one you recorded today?” Chimed Elijah, still lurking in the entryway to the kitchen. Already at age 13, he embraced his identity as a shyster. There was nothing he would ever let his sister get away with—nothing. Elijah’s words broke the spell that Mr. and Mrs. Wasserman were under—perhaps someday their daughter would grow up to be an Olympic skateboarder, as they sometimes fantasized, or at least a competitive gamer, but they were suddenly reminded of their more immediate duty to arbitrate in that afternoon’s affairs. It was disappointing. The initial argument had seamlessly transitioned into family time. But as much as they were still angry at Elijah, sadly, they could not continue watching Tamara’s playthroughs without investigating their eldest son’s accusation.

“What does he mean, Tammie?” Asked Mrs. Wasserman. Tamara silently scrolled through her saved games and found the most recent recording. She was nervous, and suddenly resented her brother’s ability to embrace and spin his guilt into a less heinous offense. It was harder for her to let her parent’s down, and though she scrolled more and more slowly, the menu ineluctably reached the video that would be her confession. “Come on Tamara,” uttered Mr. Wasserman, growing impatient with his daughter’s stall tactics. Ezra never took his eyes off the screen. “Show them how you live the culture,” Elijah added.

In keeping with Tamara's signature, the playthrough began at the top of a hill, with the entire city as the backdrop. The line started with something simple—a slappy, then a wallride—before immediately pointing the character downhill. On the previous playthrough, she possessed the sleek determination of an eagle diving for a fish, but this time, however, the character was clearly off balance. With speed wobbles practically liquifying her legs, the character suddenly cartwheeled headlong down the hill, sliding almost 20 feet, before coming to a halt between the tires of a parked car. The full impact of the scene had yet to sink in, but Elijah's expression grew more excited. "Keep watching," he instructed.

Tamara's character eased herself back onto her feet, and limped back up the hill. Again, nothing seemed unusual about the encounter—no one considered whether or not the character could feel pain. After all, she is a computer generated animation, not an actual reflection of a person. But soon a certain truth about their daughter would become clear to Mr. and Mrs. Wasserman. The scene restarted, and this time, the character jumped carelessly back onto her board, easing herself to the hill's steep descent. It was clear from her stance that the injuries she had sustained kept her from looking poised and confident as before, and she lost her balance almost immediately. Like a 1970s car chase, she careened over off a second hilltop, but rather than land on all four wheels, she flipped head over heels, her arms spinning backwards as if she were rolling down a car window. When she finally came to a stop, she could barely get up.

Mr. and Mrs. Wasserman watched as the video zoomed onto the ever-bloodier face of their daughter's character. A black eye was beginning to form, and her hair was matted with a small trickle of blood. She had even torn her pants, exhibiting a huge brush burn on her left buttcheek. When the character finally fainted, presumably from a concussion, Mr. and Mrs. Wasserman winced, but Tamara did not share their concern. She let out a huge laugh. And another. She couldn't control herself. Her eyes lit up, and by the time her character puked on the shoes of



hapless good samaritan who had stopped to help her, Tamara's laughter filled the room. Not really knowing why, Ezra even let out a few laughs, too.

Mr. and Mrs. Wasserman didn't have much time to debate the nature of their daughter's abusive playthrough—whether comedy or masochism—before Mrs. Wasserman received a text from an unknown number. It read "Click the following link to view your invoice from SF General." She followed the link to an official looking PDF, which displayed a bill for emergency procedures totalling 12,000 dollars. She hadn't yet pieced things together, but more worried that her children had suffered any of the injuries listed on her phone, she quickly surveyed her family. No one appeared to be injured. No one had suffered blunt trauma to the head, a fractured ankle, a minor concussion. No one required any of the treatments for which she had been charged. It didn't make sense to her until she looked at the screen again. A menu popped up as EMTs loaded Tamara's character into an ambulance. "You are not playing on insurance mode. Purchase insurance or click to accept all charges." Mrs. Wasserman's heart dropped as she watched the "accept" button begin to glow.

"I didn't know she was uninsured," Tamara blurted out, still holding back laughter as her character was brought in for an emergency splenectomy. Had she not been enjoying herself so much, she might have successfully plead temporary insanity. The pressures of looking after her two brothers, each immature in his own way, had pushed her to the brink. This was the only escape. But something about the game version of herself having a game spleen removed tickled her profoundly, as if the uncanny valley of Real Skate SF was actually just a comical hallucination. The unreality of this world may have called for greater levels of carnage to feel real, but her actual spleen was beginning to hurt from all the laughter. "You're disturbed," Elijah said, before looking back at his phone.

The room was silent, except for the character's respirator—the surgery had apparently been a success. For all the questions Mr. and Mrs. Wasserman had about their children's behavior, their concern was dwarfed by this disastrous credit card bill. Even if they had kept their kids alive for over a decade, they certainly couldn't afford a second set of identical kids, especially ones that run amok in the digital realm. Mr. and Mrs. Wasserman watched as Elijah kept looking at his phone, and Tamara started the playthrough again. The parents thought for a moment, as the sounds of Tamara's character hitting the pavement played in the background.

With four out of the five Wassermans distracted, no one noticed the doorbell ring, or that Ezra got up from the couch to answer it. They had barely paid attention to him the entire day—his brother and sister preoccupied with their in-game expenditures for most of the afternoon, and his parents equally entertained as dismayed by their eldest children. No one noticed the security system chime when the door opened. The conversation Ezra had with the visitor went entirely unheard. Had they listened, though, they might have recognized it as a negotiation between their family member and the visitor. Indeed, they might have been a little less surprised when their youngest kin confidently returned to the living, unplugged the PS4, gathered the controllers, and headed back to the door. But there was no way they could have anticipated when the six year-old sat back on the couch holding a massive wad of cash.

A moment went by. Ezra peeled five twenty dollar bills off the top, and wrapped a rubberband around the rest. "That's from Damien. He says thanks," he said, handing the enormous bundle of money to his parents.

Everyone remained silent while Ezra counted his money over and over again, each time meticulously folding the bills in half, and then individually flipping them back up. 100 dollars—it was more money than he had ever held, the most amount of cash he had ever been in

possession of (besides birthdays, though most gifts took the form of gift cards and checks). The family stared at him. “Who’s Damien?” Tamara finally asked.

“He’s an eleventh-grader,” Ezra replied.

“Does he have a last name?” asked Elijah. “Does he go to my school?”

“I don’t know,” Ezra replied.

The mystery seemed no closer to being solved, when Elijah realized he had been tagged in a post by someone he didn’t follow. Finally, after going through the entire follow/follow back proceedings, he was able to see what it was. Someone with the handle @daddy\_damien03 had posted a picture of his own character wearing the Supreme X Jordan trainers. He was in front of the Cartoon Museum, standing perfectly upright, with his hand on his chin, his face contorted into a caricature of thoughtfulness. “My business is anything but funny,” read the caption. His post had received only a few hundred likes, but Elijah still felt the sting. Even though the shoes never took a physical form, he felt robbed of something valuable, not so much like he had dropped some money on the ground or had been stood up. More that his identity had been stolen, that someone was masquerading as him. But mostly, he felt that a single Instagram post hardly seemed worth the con. That he would not be getting that free pair.

Looking over his shoulder, Tamara saw who she assumed to be Damien’s character wearing the shoes that had caused so much controversy in their household, but before she could gloat over her brother’s loss, she received a text from an unknown number asking if she knew her character’s blood type. She laughed at first—the idea of blood, and specific blood types in the game triggered another bought of glee. Wanting to drag the exchange out a little longer, she

replied, “why?”, but the ensuing response put an end to her enjoyment. “Because I’m trying to not get her to die”.

Tamara didn’t understand what was going on. She googled “Tamara Wasserman Real Skate SF”, and, after scrolling past the usual hits, discovered multiple posts on Twitch about her character—it was nearly trending—except it was not in the usual forums, rather, she was looking through subthreads called “NursePlay”. Video after video depicted a character going through medical procedures in the game. She watched as a character underwent physical therapy on her elbow. Another was recovering from a broken leg. Videos depicting her character were already at the top of the queue, though there were only two. In both, the character was unconscious, but she could tell from one to the next her condition had improved. Her breathing was less erratic, and she didn’t wince when she stirred in her sleep. “Wow, I’ve never seen one this bad,” read one comment, followed by several heart eye emojis. “That’s terrible what Tammie did to her. She’s lucky she didn’t die. But she’s even luckier to have you,” wrote another commenter, punctuating her text with four leaf clovers and rainbows. It went on: “People say this culture is violent, but we know care is what makes it real.” Tamara was incensed—not because her character hadn’t died, but rather because there was someone who had reimagined her destructive impulses into something cuter, something more sincere.

Mr. and Mrs. Wasserman were too busy counting the money to pay attention to their eldest kids’ defeats. By the time Elijah and Tamara were both brooding on the couch, reconnoitering against their newfound adversaries on their phones, their parent’s had tallied the cash. Exactly 12,800 dollars, the amount their children had charged to the family credit card. The presence of the money brought each family member’s memory of that afternoon into accord. It wasn’t as though anyone felt Ezra had saved the day, so much as there was no longer a reason to blame anyone for the problem. The cash had simply erased the controversy, and the Wassermans were able to

feel grateful that Real Skate SF had facilitated an afternoon together. It was a small triumph, they all felt, considering their litigation of one another a sign of togetherness.

Having enjoyed his moment in the spotlight, Ezra put his money away. There was no reason to share the full story of how he had been able to sell the PS4, including their saved game, for so much money. He remembered how his siblings had been distracted for the latter part of the afternoon, arguing over who had been more extravagant in their expenditures. Yet their competitiveness taught him an important, and fundamental aspect of the gameplay—the presence of the healthcare industry only confirmed that the user experience was essentially a marketplace. So, it only made sense to Ezra when Damien, the son of a tech VC, approached him to buy out his family's game. There was only a moment of hesitation after Damien made his offer, during which Ezra assessed an additional 100 dollars would be necessary to complete the sale. A handshake in the game, it turned out, was legally binding, but it didn't matter. Ezra was already counting his cash.