

Ready Player One



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ERNEST CLINE

Ernest Cline grew up on a farm in Ohio that he claims resembled the *Star Wars* planet Tatooine. As a child, he was obsessed with *Star Wars* and other science fiction books and movies. As he grew older, he also developed an obsession with 1980s pop culture. In his early 20s he participated in poetry slams and wrote several film scripts. One script, *Fanboys*, was turned into a 2009 film, but Cline was disappointed with the results. He regretted that his original script had been changed so much and hoped to write a film based on his own novel in order to have more control over the final product. The result was *Ready Player One*, Cline's debut novel, which sold at auction in 2010. The book became a bestseller upon its publication and was turned into a 2018 movie directed by Steven Spielberg, with a script written by Cline. Cline published a second science fiction novel, *Armada*, in 2015, and is working on a sequel to *Ready Player One*. He lives in Austin with his wife, fellow writer and slam poet Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Although the novel is set in the year 2045, it draws on real history up until the point at which it transitions into the future. The novel refers to the economic boom of the 1980s and '90s, which was followed by the Great Recession beginning in 2008. Another important historical element of the novel is the development in computer technology and artificial intelligence from the '80s to the present (and beyond). Wade notes that the first computer Halliday owned was slow and awkward to use; for example, it needed to be turned off and on again anytime a videogame cartridge was inserted. The novel imagines the computer technology of the present—including virtual reality headsets and haptic gloves—improved to the point that it offers an even more comfortable, immersive, and realistic experience. Alongside technological developments, the novel also imagines that current problems plaguing the world—including climate change, decreasing fossil fuel reserves, world hunger, unchecked corporate power, social inequality, and extreme poverty—become worse to the point of catastrophe by the year 2045.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Ready Player One is one of a large number of books that imagine an apocalyptic, dystopian landscape—often created by climate change, a global energy crisis, and widespread poverty—and which feature a young hero who possesses intelligence and

courage beyond their years. These books range from Octavia Butler's *The Parable of the Sower* to Cory Doctorow's *Little Brother* to Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*. *Ready Player One* falls within the LitRPG subgenre of science fiction, meaning it features the conventions of massive multiplayer online role-playing games (such as the OASIS itself) and includes games as a substantial part of the plot. In this sense, it is similar other LitRPGs such as Conor Kostick's *The Avatar Chronicles* series. Like *Ready Player One*, Daniel Suarez's novel *Daemon* also tells the story of the death of a famous computer game designer and its aftermath.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Ready Player One*
- **When Written:** 2000-10
- **Where Written:** Austin, Texas
- **When Published:** 2011
- **Literary Period:** 21st Century American Science Fiction
- **Genre:** LitRPG Science Fiction
- **Setting:** Outskirts of Oklahoma City; Columbus, Ohio; the OASIS, in the year 2045
- **Climax:** When Wade successfully obtains Halliday's Easter egg
- **Antagonist:** The Sixers/Nolan Sorrento
- **Point of View:** First person, from the perspective of Wade Watts

EXTRA CREDIT

Art imitating life. Like Wade in the novel, Ernest Cline drives a vintage 1980s DeLorean sports car in real life.

A puzzle inside a puzzle. After the publication of *Ready Player One*, Cline announced that the novel contained its own Easter egg, and whoever could complete a series of trials similar to those in the book would win their own DeLorean. The winner was announced in 2012.



PLOT SUMMARY

Wade recalls the moment when he heard about the death of James Halliday, the creator of a multiplayer game named **the OASIS**. The ordinary TV broadcast was interrupted with a short film entitled *Anorak's Invitation*, in which Halliday recites the "highlights" of his will. He transforms into Anorak, his OASIS avatar, and announces that he's hidden an Easter egg in OASIS. The first person to find it will inherit his entire fortune

and estate. He recites the first clue about the Easter egg's location, and wonders aloud if he's made the hunt too difficult. He announces the beginning of the hunt, and the video ends.

Before long, a subculture is born. Those who participate in the hunt are known as "gunters"; although there are always some gunters boasting that they are on the edge of a breakthrough, years pass and nobody finds anything, and most people lose interest in the hunt. Suddenly, in 2045, Wade—an 18-year-old living in a trailer park on the outskirts of Oklahoma City—appears on the scoreboard. He will now tell the story of what happens next.

Wade wakes up to the sound of gunshots. When it gets cold he stays in his Aunt Alice's trailer with fifteen other people. Wade's parents were both refugees. His father was killed while looting a grocery store during a blackout. His mother, Loretta, was an OASIS telemarketer and sex worker. She was also a drug user, and when the narrator was 11 she died after shooting up a "bad batch of something." Ever since the energy crisis pushed refugees into the major cities, multi-level "stacks" of trailer parks like the one in which Wade lives started appearing around urban areas. Wade has a "hideout"—an abandoned van—in which he keeps his belongings, attends school, and plays the OASIS.

Wade named his OASIS avatar Parzival, but at school he must use his real name. Wade is not looking forward to graduating; he doesn't have enough money to attend college, so his only option is to become a full-time gunter. In sixth grade he transferred to an OASIS school on the planet Ludus, where all OASIS schools are located.

A corporation named **Innovative Online Industries** has hired professional oologists (egg-hunters) nicknamed "Sixers" to find the Easter egg on its behalf. The IOI hopes to take control of the OASIS and aggressively monetize it, charging users a monthly fee. Wade reads the blog of a gunter named Art3mis, confessing that he has a "massive cyber-crush" on her. He instant messages his friend Aech and they arrange to meet in Aech's chat room, the Basement. Wade, Aech, and another avatar named I-rOk quiz each other on trivia.

The OASIS is shaped like a Rubik's Cube, with 27 cubed "sectors." Travelling across one sector at the speed of light is expensive and takes 10 hours. Avatars can gain experience points—XPs—by completing quests and fighting NPC villains. However, these don't exist on Ludus. With difficulty Wade has managed to raise his avatar to the third level by briefly hitching rides to other planets and earning XPs there; however, no gunter is considered serious until they reach the tenth level.

Wade's favorite class is Advanced OASIS studies, which he finds easy because he knows everything there is to know about Halliday. He explains that Halliday was a highly eccentric genius obsessed with video games, sci-fi and fantasy, and the 1980s. He is thought to have been autistic. Gregarious Games, a

company Halliday cofounded with his friend Ogden Morrow, was rebranded in 2012 as Gregarious Simulation Systems (GSS), at which point it released its only product, the Ontologically Anthropocentric Sensory Immersive Simulation—the OASIS. As Earth became more and more afflicted by poverty, famine, and chaos, people ended up spending most of their time in the OASIS.

One day in Latin class, Wade has a breakthrough about the meaning of the Limerick, the first clue in the hunt, and realizes that the Copper Key might be hidden on Ludus. He is stunned to see that the Tomb of Horrors is only 70km from his school and he manages to travel there by pretending he is going to his school's football game. Everything goes well until he encounters the demi-lich, Acererak, who challenges him to a joust. Wade beats him, and Acererak transforms into Halliday's avatar, Anorak, to give Wade his reward: the Copper Key. Wade also receives 50,000 XPs, raising his avatar to the tenth level.

Wade's next mission is to journey to Halliday's recreation of his childhood home in **Middletown, Ohio**. As Wade is leaving the Tomb of Horrors, he sees Art3mis, who has failed to defeat Acererak. Wade lies and pretends Acererak beat him too. Art3mis realizes he's lying and is furious at first; however, they part ways on friendly terms.

In Halliday's childhood bedroom, Wade discovers the First Gate, a portal which opens to deep space. He jumps through and lands inside a vintage video arcade, and soon realizes that he is in a simulation of the 1983 film *WarGames*. He has been transformed into Matthew Broderick's character in the movie, and must play the role correctly based on memory. He successfully reaches the end of the movie, at which point the scoreboard updates, showing that he has now completed the first gate. However, Wade is exhausted. He takes off his visor and goes to sleep in his hideout for 12 hours.

Wade awakes to discover that Art3mis has now passed the First Gate too. Morrow is interviewed on the news, his first appearance in years. Halliday and Morrow had a falling out years ago, but no one knows why. Wade receives sponsorships from companies who will pay him in XPs. He receives an email from Nolan Sorrento, the Head of Operations at IOI, offering to recruit him as a Sixer.

Wade connects with Sorrento via chatlink, a communication tool that allows him to travel to the IOI headquarters in hologram form. Sorrento explains the vast system the Sixers have developed to find the egg and offers Wade the position of Chief Oologist. When Wade refuses, Sorrento offers him \$5 million on the spot in exchange for explaining how to get through the First Gate, but Wade again declines the offer. Finally, Sorrento reveals that he knows Wade's true identity and that he has wired Aunt Alice's trailer with explosives. He threatens to kill Wade, but Wade still refuses and logs out of the OASIS. Back in his hideout, he hears a nearby explosion.

That night, Wade attends a private chatroom meeting in the Basement with the top four avatars on the OASIS scoreboard: Art3mis, Aech, Daito, and Shoto. Aech brings up the idea of forming an alliance, but Daito and Shoto refuse and abruptly leave. Over the next few days, hundreds of Sixers pass through the First Gate. Wade uses his first endorsement check to buy himself a bus ticket to Columbus. During the journey, Wade logs into the OASIS and buys himself a new identity, Bryce Lynch. He arrives at his new apartment in Columbus and vows not to leave it until he finds the egg.

In a chat, Wade reveals to Art3mis that he has a crush on her. She agrees to tell him a few things about herself, but then logs off and says they can't talk again until one of them finds the egg. However, when Wade emails her, she responds, and they begin hanging out. Wade graduates from high school and works on bringing his avatar up to the highest level, 99. One day, he has a breakthrough and realizes that the latest clue—the Quatrain—has something to do with Cap'n Crunch cereal. Soon after, he and Art3mis kiss for the first time.

Wade receives an invitation to Morrow's 73rd birthday party at the Distracted Globe, a zero-gravity dance club. He and Art3mis dance together, and he confesses that he is in love with her. Art3mis dismisses him, emphasizing that they don't actually know each other in reality and that their relationship has led them to neglect the hunt. Suddenly, Sixers begin shooting up the club; Morrow vaporizes them and the party resumes, but Art3mis leaves.

Wade sets up shop on an asteroid on Sector Fourteen, which he has bought and named Falco. He has been living in Columbus for five months, and it has been eight weeks since he last spoke to Art3mis. He and Aech are no longer friends, although he has managed to strike up a friendship with Daito and Shoto. Using his fake identity, he has also managed to get a job doing low-level OASIS technical support. One day, at the end of a shift, he discovered that Art3mis has obtained the Jade Key.

The Sixers are now in possession of an artifact called Fyndoro's Tablet of Finding, which will help them with the Hunt. Wade flies his starship, the *Vonnegut*, to a planet named Archaide, which is a museum of old arcade games. To his surprise, Wade finds a recreation of Happytime Pizza, a pizza place Halliday frequented as a child. Inside, there is a Pac-Man machine, which Wade realizes contains another Easter egg. However, while he is playing, he sees that Aech has overtaken him on the scoreboard. Wade manages to get the new high score on Pac-Man, and at the same moment receives a message from Aech with a clue that leads him to the Jade Key, which is situated on a nearby planet called Frobozz. Wade successfully locates the key and narrowly avoids an encounter with a group of Sixers. The violent clashes between gunters and Sixers that ensues is known as the Battle of Frobozz. During the action, Shoto finds the key, but in almost the same moment, Daito is killed.

Sorrento clears the Second Gate and rises to first place on the

scoreboard. Wade watches with horror as dozens of Sixers find the Crystal Key. Shoto visits Wade and explains that it is not just Daito's avatar that's dead. The Sixers killed Daito himself, framing it as a suicide. After Shoto leaves, Wade has another breakthrough, realizing that the next gate has something to do with the 1982 film *Blade Runner*. He flies the *Vonnegut* to a planet called Axrenox, where he enters one of the countless copies of the Tyrell Building that exist in the OASIS. He uses the Jade Key to enter a bowling alley, where he enters a recreation of an old video game named Black Tiger. He hears the clue about where the Crystal Key is in the lyrics of a song by Halliday's favorite band, Rush. He travels to Syrinx, a deserted planet, and enters the Temple of the Syrinx. Wade realizes he has to play a song on the guitar, and once he is done, the guitar transforms into the Crystal Key.

Wade realizes that the Third Gate must be hidden inside Castle Anorak on the planet Chthonia, "the gunters' Mecca." The whole army of Sixers are already there, along with countless gunters. Everyone thinks the hunt is almost over. Wade emails Art3mis, Aech, and Shoto, telling them how to find the Crystal Key. He vows to find the Third Gate or "die trying."

IOI police descend on Wade's apartment in Columbus to arrest him for overdue payments on his visa card. Wade enters the OASIS and orders his computer to self-destruct just before the police break into the apartment. They take him to 101 IOI Plaza, where he is to be indentured. He is given the job of OASIS Technical Support Representative II and is forced to sign an indenturement contract. During the day, Wade works obediently, but at night he secretly plans to infiltrate the Sixer's database and destroy the shield they've created over Anorak's castle. Having hacked into the database, he learns that the Sixers plan to kill Art3mis and Shoto after they find the egg. Working quickly, he downloads data from the Sixer database and wipes his own debt. He escapes the IOI prison by wearing the uniform of maintenance-tech worker he bought on the black market.

Wade buys new clothing and a gun. He then goes to the Plug, a place where he can privately log into the OASIS that is not owned by IOI. Once he is logged in, Wade emails all the major news networks with evidence of how IOI had killed Daito, tried to kill Wade, and planned to kill Art3mis and Aech. He then logs into the Basement, where Aech, Art3mis, and Shoto are waiting. Together, they realize that Halliday designed the Hunt so that three avatars would have to face each other at the Third Gate. Wade shows the others an email he plans to send to every single gunter, asking them to come together and fight the Sixers as a team. Suddenly, Og appears, offering to help. He reveals that he promised Halliday to protect the hunt, and offers to house Aech, Art3mis, Shoto, and Wade at his home in Oregon for the final battle.

On the way to Oregon, Wade meets Aech for the first time in real life and discovers that she is actually an African-American

teenage lesbian whose real name is Helen. At Morrow's mansion, the team enter the OASIS, where every avatar is heading to Castle Anorak. There, the gunter-Sixer battle takes place. Shoto's avatar is killed and Wade's is seriously injured. However, he manages to keep going and kill Sorrento's avatar. He meets Aech and Art3mis at the Third Gate, but just as they are about to enter, there is a massive explosion and their avatars all die. Just as Wade is convinced he is about to see "Game Over," he learns that he has an extra life. Aech and Art3mis' avatars remain dead, though he can hear them speaking to him.

Wade must play another vintage video game, *Tempest*, while the "whole world" watches. He eventually achieves the highest score and is instantly transported into the movie *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, which he reenacts with joyful ease. Wade then appears in a simulation of Halliday's office, and realizes that the Easter egg must be hidden in this room. After several tries, he manages to log onto Halliday's computer and retrieves the egg. Halliday appears and tells him that he is now in charge of OASIS, that his avatar is immortal, and that he can have anything he wants. Wade kills the remaining Sixers and resurrects Art3mis, Aech, and Shoto's avatars.

After logging out of the OASIS, Wade goes to find Art3mis, who tells him that her real name is Samantha. He confesses his love for her again, and they kiss.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Wade Watts / Parzival – Wade Owen Watts is the narrator and hero of the novel. Parzival is the name of his **OASIS** avatar. He is 18 years old when the novel begins, and lives in the Portland Avenue Stacks in his Aunt Alice's trailer on the edge of Oklahoma City. At the beginning of the novel Wade is shy, overweight loner whose parents are both dead and whose aunt treats him badly. He is poor and has no prospects of improving his life, and therefore spends almost all his time absorbed in the OASIS, where he obsessively studies the life of James Halliday and familiarizes himself with Halliday's obsessions. This means that although Wade is reasonably powerless, he has a secret advantage of immense knowledge about Halliday and skill at the videogames Halliday loved. Wade is able to put this knowledge to use when he is the first person to discover the Copper Key, thereby emerging as the early frontrunner in the Easter egg hunt. Wade almost jeopardizes himself by becoming too distracted by his crush on Art3mis to sustain his early success in the hunt. However, as the novel progresses, he becomes more brave, level-headed, and mature, in part through realizing the importance of prioritizing people other than himself. By the end of the novel, Wade is ready to accept Halliday's advice that he cannot spend all his time inside the

OASIS. Although at this point Wade has won the hunt and is now a multi-billionaire who controls the simulation, he realizes that he must also embrace the real world in order to have a meaningful life.

James Halliday / Anorak – James Donovan Halliday is the creator of **the OASIS** and instigator of the Easter egg hunt. His OASIS avatar is a wizard called Anorak. He was born in 1972 and grew up in **Middletown, Ohio**. His father was an alcoholic and his mother suffered from bipolar disorder, and the two of them often fought. To make matters worse, Halliday was an extremely shy and awkward child. He is thought to have been on the autism spectrum, and was extremely intelligent, with certain "obsessions" such as computers, videogames, and 1980s pop culture. Halliday retreated into his obsessions in order to avoid the misery of his life. In high school, he designs his first videogame, and after graduating he founds a company with his best friend Ogen Morrow, titled Gregarious Games. In 2012, he and Morrow release the OASIS. Although Halliday dies a multi-billionaire who is one of the most idolized people on the planet, it becomes clear that he had regrets about the way he lived his life. Chief among these is the fact that he never confessed his feelings to Kira Underwood, a childhood friend who became Morrow's wife and who was the only person Halliday ever loved.

Aunt Alice – Alice is Wade's aunt and the owner of the trailer in which he lives. Although she takes in Wade after Loretta dies, she is cruel and selfish, and keeps the food vouchers that the government gives her for Wade for herself. She is killed when **IOI** wires her trailer with explosives, hoping to kill Wade.

Mrs. Gilmore – Mrs. Gilmore is Wade's neighbor; she lives in a mobile home in the same stack as him, below Aunt Alice's trailer. She is very religious and spends most of her time inside **OASIS** megachurches. She is kind and generous to Wade, and he is devastated when she is killed in the explosion.

Art3mis – Art3mis is one of the most famous gunters in the world. She has a blog called *Arty's Missives*, in which she discusses her research into Halliday's obsessions, and it is through reading this blog that Wade develops a "massive cyber-crush on her." Unlike most female **OASIS** users, Art3mis does not choose a super-skinny or "porn-style" body for her avatar, but rather a short, "Rubenesque" figure that reflects her real appearance. Art3mis and Wade develop a close relationship, but when Wade says he's in love with her Art3mis shies away, insisting that he doesn't really know her. By the novel's end, she comes to trust Wade again and is prepared to reignite their relationship. In real life, Art3mis' name is Samantha. She is a 19-year-old college student studying Creative Writing and Poetry.

Aech – Aech is Wade's best friend and one of the most famous gunters in the world. Every Friday, Aech competes in televised fights, earning money and experience points. Aech's private

chatroom, the Basement, is an exclusive hangout for “top-level gunters.” (S)he is generous and supportive, and is a good friend to Wade. Although Aech uses a white male avatar, toward the end of the novel it is revealed that in real life (s)he is a young black lesbian named Helen Harris. Aech is nervous for Wade to discover this truth, but in the end it turns out that nothing changes between them.

I-rOk – I-rOk is a gunter who sometimes hangs out in the Basement. Although he has a high-level avatar, Wade dismisses him as an “obnoxious poseur” who doesn’t really know anything about Halliday. I-rOk snitches on Wade and Aech, revealing to the world that they are students on Ludus and inadvertently leading IOI to discover Wade’s true identity.

Ogden Morrow aka Og – Ogden Morrow is the cofounder of **the OASIS**. He and Halliday were best friends in high school; they were both nerds, although Morrow was more confident and charismatic than Halliday. Morrow fell in love with Kira Underwood while he was in high school, and the two later got married. Although Morrow was a co-creator of the OASIS, he came to feel that the simulation was having a negative impact on humanity, and left Gregarious Simulation Systems 10 years after the OASIS was released. After Kira was killed in a car accident, he retreated to live a quiet, reclusive life in his home in Oregon. However, before Halliday’s death he promises to keep an eye on the hunt for him, and thus when it seems as if the Sixers are going to win the hunt through unfair methods, Morrow intervenes and helps out Wade and his friends.

Daito – Daito is a Japanese gunter who works alongside his “brother,” Shoto. Daito is intensely private and rejects both the proposition of an alliance with the other top gunters and the idea of meeting Shoto in real life. He is killed when Sixers break into his apartment and throw him off his balcony, framing it as a suicide.

Shoto – Shoto is a Japanese gunter and Daito’s “brother.” After Daito’s death, he reveals to Wade that his real name is Akihide and that he and Daito were not actually brothers—in fact, they had never met in real life. He and Daito met in the **OASIS** in a virtual support group for *hikikomori*, young people who withdraw from life and spend all their time online. After Daito is killed, Shoto swears to get revenge on IOI. At the end of the novel he forms an alliance with Wade, Aech, and Art3mis.

Nolan Sorrento – Nolan Sorrento is the Head of Operations at IOI. He has a PhD in Computer Science and, before being recruited by IOI, worked as a “high-profile videogame designer.” Sorrento is the antagonist of the novel; he is cruel, only cares about money and power, and does not respect **the OASIS**, Halliday, or the hunt. He also kills Daito, Aunt Alice, Rick, Mrs. Gilmore, and attempts to kill Wade. At the end of the novel Wade kills Sorrento’s avatar, and in real life Sorrento is arrested through his involvement with the murders.

Marie Harris – Marie Harris is Aech’s (Helen’s) mother. She is a

black woman who believes that **the OASIS** is the “best thing” to happen to women and people of color because it allows them to use a white male avatar and move through the world without being obstructed by racism and sexism. However, she retains prejudices of her own, and kicks Aech out of the house when Aech reveals that she is a lesbian.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Rick – Rick is Aunt Alice’s boyfriend. He is also killed when the trailer explodes.

Wade’s Father – Wade’s father, whose name we never learn. He was a refugee and a teenager when Wade was born. He was killed while looting a grocery store.

Loretta – Loretta was Wade’s mother. She was also a refugee and teenager when Wade was born. While Wade was a child, she had two full-time jobs inside **the OASIS**, as a telemarketer and sex worker. She was also a drug user, and died after injecting an unknown substance.

Acererak – Acererak is a digital demi-lich (undead king) who resides inside the Tomb of Horrors and challenges users to a game of Joust as a test of whether they can receive the Copper Key.

Matthew Broderick – Matthew Broderick is the star of the 1983 film *WarGames*, which features prominently in the novel.

Kira Underwood – Kira Underwood was a friend of Halliday and Morrow in high school. Described as a “quintessential geek girl,” both Halliday and Morrow were in love with her. She married Morrow and together they cofounded Halcydonia Interactive, a company that produces educational software. She was killed in a car accident.

Max – Max is not a character exactly; he is Wade’s running system agent software, which is sort of like a virtual personal assistant.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



REALITY VS. ILLUSION

The central question posed by *Ready Player One* is whether reality is necessarily better than illusion, particularly if reality has become an increasingly nightmarish place. In the world of the novel, a global energy crisis, poverty, and famine mean that the vast majority of the world’s population live extremely difficult lives. This is certainly

true for Wade: he is poor, both his parents are dead, and he is forced to live in a cramped trailer with his cruel Aunt Alice. As a result, Wade avoids existing in reality as much as possible, instead choosing to immerse himself in a massive simulation: **the OASIS**. Although Wade is still relatively poor and powerless in the OASIS, the game is a far more pleasant place than reality. It affords many more opportunities than exist in the real world and overall offers a better quality of life. For this reason, it is not just Wade who spends all the time he can logged into the game—most of the world does, too.

Although the OASIS is the main example of an illusion to which people retreat in order to avoid reality, other kinds of illusions appear in the novel, too. Some people, such as Wade’s neighbor Mrs. Gilmore, turn to religion as a means of escape from the horrors of their day-to-day existence. Wade is disdainful of religion because he believes that it is little more than a fairy tale—or, in other words, an illusion. This is somewhat ironic, considering that Wade himself is so invested in an illusion (the OASIS) and for most of the novel he doesn’t believe that there is any value in engaging with reality more than is absolutely necessary. On the other hand, the OASIS is arguably a far more concrete, tangible illusion than religion, providing a much more convincing and viable escape from reality than religion can offer.

The novel also calls the distinction between reality and illusion into question. Wade spends so much time inside the OASIS that it is arguably more real to him than reality itself. He goes to school and has a job inside the OASIS; it is also the place where he hangs out with his only friend, Aech, and where he falls in love with Art3mis. What’s more, the OASIS has a substantial impact on the real world. Daito, Aunt Alice, Mrs. Gilmore, and Wade’s neighbors are all killed by the **IOI** as a result of events within the OASIS, and Wade narrowly avoids the same fate. Halliday’s Easter egg hunt, meanwhile, does not only offer glory within the OASIS, but also bestows on the winner Halliday’s entire fortune, a decidedly “real” prize. When a simulation like the OASIS is so all-consuming and so closely tied to real life, is it really accurate to call it an illusion?

Although *Ready Player One* does blur the distinction between reality and illusion, overall the novel emphasizes the importance of maintaining a connection to reality. After Wade finds the egg, a simulation of Halliday appears, explaining that his greatest regret was shying away from the real world so much. He tells Wade that he never felt comfortable in reality, but that he wished he’d forced himself to spend more time there, because reality may be the only place it is possible to find true happiness. Taking Halliday’s advice, Wade has his first proper, real-life conversation with Art3mis (whose real name is Samantha), during which he confesses his love for her. The novel ends at this moment, thereby underlining a sense of hope in the possibilities of the real world.



NERDS, UNDERDOGS, AND OBSESSION

The heroes of the novel—Wade, Art3mis, Aech, Morrow, and Halliday—are all united by the fact that they are nerds and underdogs whose power lies in their shared obsessions. None of them possess the typical attributes of a hero. They lack physical strength, and Wade, Art3mis, and Aech in particular are described as overweight. In the real world, the characters—particularly Wade and Halliday—lack charisma, and find interacting with other people uncomfortable and anxiety-inducing. However, the strength they do possess lies in their intelligence and their mutual obsessions with video games, computing, trivia, and the 1980s. In the end, it is Wade’s mastery of Halliday and **OASIS** trivia that allows him to emerge as a serious gunter (Easter egg-hunter) and eventually win the hunt.

There are many parallels between Wade and Halliday’s trajectories in the novel; in both cases, nerds go from being powerless, victimized underdogs to powerful, admired figures. Halliday was a shy, awkward child whose father was an alcoholic and whose parents fought constantly. Wade is also shy, and he must deal with the even more extreme issue of being an impoverished orphan in the midst of an apocalyptic, dystopian world.

Whereas Wade’s difficulties are slightly more circumstantial—they are the product of his environment more than his personal characteristics—many of Halliday’s struggles stem from the fact that he is autistic. People with autism can find certain aspects of human socialization difficult, a fact emphasized by Halliday’s difficulty existing in the real world. However, as the novel shows, people with autism do not necessarily have something wrong with them; instead, they just interact with the world in a different way, which can also have benefits, such as Halliday’s intelligence and creativity. While Halliday may have trouble existing in the real world, he is able to build another world in which he thrives—one far more suited to nerds, underdogs, and obsessives like himself.

Wade, Halliday, Aech, and others use their obsessions as a means of escape from their dire circumstances, but also to transform the world around them. Halliday becomes obsessed with computer programming, video games, and pop culture, and Wade follows suit, spending his entire time in the OASIS increasing his knowledge about Halliday and Halliday’s interests. Ultimately, these obsessions do not only allow Halliday and Wade to forget about their difficult lives. They actually become the means through which they gain real wealth, power, and respect.

Furthermore, the novel implies that nerds and underdogs have a stronger moral compass than those who were born into privilege or natural confidence. When Wade finds the egg, Halliday asks him to use his new wealth and power for good. Although Wade had originally planned to use the money to

build a spaceship on which he and his friends could escape Earth and find another habitable planet, he ultimately decides to take Halliday and Art3mis' advice and use it to help feed the needy and make Earth a better place. Wade's experience as an underdog leads him to want to help other disadvantaged people with his newfound money and power.



THE INDIVIDUAL VS. THE COLLECTIVE

Ready Player One is in some ways a story of individual achievement and success, yet it also highlights the importance of alliances, teamwork,

and community. Throughout the novel, Wade and the other characters struggle to reconcile their impulses to act alone with their desire to connect with others. At the beginning of the story, Wade only has one friend, Aech, and no family members; he is essentially a loner. To some extent, his inclination to act alone is encouraged by the design of Halliday's Easter egg hunt. Although **the OASIS** is a massive multi-user game with many opportunities for connection and community-building, the hunt itself can have only one winner and seems therefore to encourage acting alone. The novel suggests that striking a balance between acting alone and maintaining connections with others is sometimes difficult. However, it suggests that individual self-expression, independence, and achievement—while important—are ultimately meaningless without a connection to others.

Wade is not the only character who isolates himself from others. When Aech proposes an alliance between the top gunters, Art3mis, Shoto, and Daito refuse, pointing out that the hunt can have only one winner. Later on, Art3mis freaks out when Wade confesses his love for her and stops speaking to him on the basis that their relationship has led both of them to become distracted and neglect the hunt. While she ultimately reverses her position and apologizes for disappearing, her insistence that she and Wade stop speaking to one another proves prudent. Wade's relationship with Art3mis does indeed hinder his ability to succeed at the hunt. This suggests that, while friendship, romance, and other forms of collective connection are valuable, sometimes isolating oneself is also important.

The most significant example of individual triumph over the collective emerges in Wade's period of **IOI** indenturement. While in the IOI prison, Wade is stripped of his individuality; he is made to wear a uniform and live with other IOI indentured workers, and is given a mundane job in which there is no room for individual expression. This part of the novel highlights the negative side of "collective" existence, wherein individual freedom is subsumed under oppressive, authoritarian power.

Despite illuminating certain downsides of collective existence, the novel ultimately suggests that individual achievement is always enabled by a collective on some level and only becomes meaningful when shared with others. Although Wade wins the

hunt, it is strongly implied that he would not have been able to do so on his own. Only with the help of his friends at different stages of the hunt is he able to make it to the final stage and locate the egg. Acknowledging this, Wade announces that he will split the money equally with his friends and will use his part of the wealth to feed the masses. Thus, while the novel is a story of individual triumph, it also emphasizes the codependence of the individual and the collective.



INEQUALITY, ELITISM, AND CORPORATE POWER

The world of the novel is afflicted by a variety of problems, but perhaps the most significant stem from corporate greed, elitism, and inequality. As most people on Earth become increasingly poor, the oppressive power of corporations like **IOI** increases. IOI, which stands for Innovative Online Industries, is a communications conglomerate and internet service provider that embodies the trope of the evil corporation. Indeed, the reason that Wade is so desperate to win the Easter egg hunt is not just because he wants this triumph for himself. It is also to stop a Sixer from winning, which would give IOI control over **the OASIS**. Wade explains that under an IOI takeover, the OASIS would start charging a user fee and would become plastered with ads. It would eventually become a "fascist corporate theme park" that could only be enjoyed by the rich. In this sense, it would reflect the issues of inequality that exist in the real world—perhaps in an even more extreme form.

Part of the reason that Wade and his friends are underdogs is that they are competing not only against high-level gunters, but also against IOI. Indeed, there are many moments in the novel in which IOI seems so powerful that it is impossible to imagine Wade succeeding against them. This includes the scene in which Sorrento attempts to recruit Wade as a Sixer, first by persuasion and then by threat. Although Wade is militantly opposed to IOI, he cannot help but be stunned by their offers. Furthermore, when they threaten to kill him by blowing up Aunt Alice's trailer (and when they succeed in killing Daito), Wade must confront the reality that, by any objective standard, he has no chance of succeeding when faced with their massive wealth and power.

At the same time, the novel also shows that elitism and corporate power *can* be successfully fought, even if success is highly unlikely. It is only by risking death that Wade is able to escape IOI's clutches and ultimately win the hunt. Yet the fact that he does so proves that such triumph is possible. Once again, Wade's ability to succeed is tied to his superior knowledge of Halliday's obsessions. His genuine love of the OASIS and all things Halliday allows him to beat the team of professional "Oologists" hired by IOI. Wade's determination to hold onto his individuality is also what helps him succeed, as it is this that gives him the courage to refuse IOI's recruitment

offer. At the same time, perhaps the most important element of Wade's battle against corporate elitism and power is his alliance with his friends. IOI functions on a foundation of selfishness and greed, but Wade's devotion to his friends—and their ability to work together as a team—allows him to overcome the inequality of the world around him and succeed in the unlikeliest of situations.



UTOPIA VS. DYSTOPIA

The Earth on which *Ready Player One* is set is dystopian, meaning that it is an imagined world in which everything has degraded to a terrible,

oppressive state of existence. In contrast, **the OASIS** at times resembles a utopia, a fact that is even reflected in the game's name. An oasis is a place in a desert containing water and fertile plant growth; similarly, the OASIS is a haven of hope, possibility, and joy in the midst of an increasingly desolate landscape. Yet the novel complicates any simple understanding of the binary between utopia and dystopia and how these might be applied to the OASIS versus planet Earth. While at times the OASIS and the real world seem easily distinguishable as a utopia vs. dystopia, both places are ultimately shown to have utopian and dystopian elements. This in turn suggests that there might not be such a thing as a “true” utopia or dystopia—in reality, things are much more complicated.

It is true that there are many elements of the OASIS that could be considered utopian. Some of these emerge in Wade's description of his OASIS school in contrast to the school he previously attended in the real world. Whereas his “real” school was chaotic and underfunded, in Wade's OASIS school resources are essentially unlimited. The fact that it occurs within a simulation means that the class can take extravagant “school trips” to other geographical locations and even other periods in time. Meanwhile, the teachers do not have to worry about bad behavior because the game automatically prevents students' avatars from behaving badly in class. Of course, while this enhances learning, it also limits students' freedom to a significant degree. The OASIS might thus be seen as a utopia with some dystopian elements.

Earth, meanwhile, has been stripped of much of what previously made it a pleasant place to live. It is decidedly dystopian insofar as it is plagued by inequality, poverty, famine, war, unchecked corporate power, and an ongoing energy crisis. At the same time, much of the OASIS—and certainly the Easter egg hunt—is built around nostalgia for Earth's pop culture. The 1980s becomes a kind of utopia within the novel, a nostalgic reminder of what Earth was once like.

Furthermore, Halliday's advice that true happiness can only be found in reality further undermines the view that the OASIS is a utopia and the real world a dystopia. Traditionally, utopias are places in which every citizen is happy. If true happiness cannot be found inside the OASIS, then the game cannot possibly be a

utopia. Likewise, the fact that true happiness can only be found in reality suggests that Earth has not yet fully degraded into a dystopia; there is still hope that things might get better.

The word “utopia” comes from Ancient Greek; it means both “good place” and “no place.” This pun is central to what utopia is understood to be, and it is particularly relevant when it comes to the OASIS. Although the OASIS is a place with many utopian elements, it is also “no place”—it doesn't really exist. The novel thus suggests that attempting to live in a utopia is ultimately a misguided aim. A perfect place cannot exist, and even if it did, it would not make everyone happy. Happiness can only be found in the real world—as dystopian as that world might be.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE OASIS

The Ontologically Anthropocentric Sensory Immersive Simulation, nicknamed the OASIS, is a massive multiplayer online game in which the characters in the novel spend most of their time. The OASIS was developed by James Halliday and Ogden Morrow and released by their company GSS in 2012. As time passes, the OASIS becomes more complex, realistic, and immersive, such that it gets harder and harder to distinguish it from reality. People work, shop, go to school, and fall in love in the OASIS, and in this sense it is less a game or simulation and more a second home for people. This is particularly significant given that, between 2012 and 2045, the real world has become an increasingly desolate, impoverished place. The name “OASIS” plays on the simulation's status as a utopia in which people can forget the burdens of reality. Indeed, it is this aspect of the OASIS that makes Wade's mission to find the Easter egg so important. Wade does not compete in Halliday's hunt only for personal glory and gain, but rather to save the OASIS from falling into the hands of **IOI** and being transformed into a “fascist corporate theme park.”

At the same time, although the novel presents a largely positive view of the OASIS and the opportunities it affords to the characters, it also highlights the dangers and downsides of the simulation. Ogden Morrow is one of the characters most prominently associated with criticism of the OASIS. Although he remains involved in the simulation, hosting his 73rd birthday party at an OASIS dance club, he left his role at GSS in 2022 on the basis that the OASIS had “become a self-imposed prison for humanity.” Wade echoes this sentiment when he likens the state-of-the-art OASIS immersion rig he constructs for himself to a prison. At the end of the novel, even Halliday posthumously warns Wade about the dangers of spending so much time in a

simulation that he neglects the real world. Halliday suggests that while the OASIS is an amazing and even utopian place, it cannot offer what reality affords: true happiness.



INNOVATIVE ONLINE INDUSTRIES (IOI)

Innovative Online Industries, known as IOI, is a communications company and the largest internet service provider in the world. As such, it wields an extremely large amount of power and embodies the trope of the “evil corporation.” IOI runs on an ethos of bloodthirsty greed. Early in the novel, the company tries to assassinate Wade by planting explosives in Aunt Alice’s trailer. Although Wade escapes, everyone in Aunt Alice’s stack (and the surrounding stacks) are killed; in a separate incident, they successfully kill Daito, framing his death as a suicide. IOI thus represents the real danger involved in participating in Halliday’s Easter egg hunt. While the hunt may appear to be “just a game,” the stakes are life and death. Furthermore, Wade’s determination to win the hunt is grounded in his desire to save **the OASIS** from falling into the hands of IOI, who he claims will transform it into a “fascist corporate theme park.” IOI plans to charge users a fee and to sell advertising space to other companies. To IOI, the OASIS has no value outside of its capacity to produce financial profit.

IOI also typifies the evil corporation trope because of the way it suppresses individuality. IOI employees must all use the same identical-looking avatar and are known by their employee numbers, all of which begin with the number 6—hence the nickname “Sixers.” When Wade is captured and sent to serve out an indenturement contract in exchange for a falsified “debt” he owes to IOI, all elements of his individuality are stripped away, and he is forced to live in a prison where freedom of expression is completely banned. While IOI often proclaims to be providing valuable services—for example, by offering free accommodation and healthcare to their employees—they in fact deliberately suppress individuality and take out anyone who threatens the supremacy of their wealth and power.



MIDDLETOWN, OHIO

Middletown is James Halliday’s childhood hometown. Its name indicates speaks to the fact that it is normal and average—an “everytown.” This is a contrast to Halliday himself, who was extraordinarily intelligent and eccentric from a very young age. Halliday had a very unhappy childhood; he was shy and awkward, with an alcoholic father and a mother who suffered from bipolar disorder. Nonetheless, he is nostalgic about the pop culture of his youth and is obsessed with making replicas of elements of his hometown inside **the OASIS**. Indeed, there is even a whole planet, Middletown, in which Halliday has created 256 identical

copies of his hometown. Wade identifies that it is strange that Halliday would so obsessively recreate a place in which he was highly unhappy. Yet as the novel unfolds, it becomes clear that part of why Halliday is nostalgic about Middletown is due to his love/hate relationship with the real world. When Wade wins the Easter egg, Halliday expresses his regret that he retreated into videogames so much and did not participate in reality more. Perhaps the prominence of Middletown inside the OASIS illustrates Halliday’s nostalgia for the part of his life wherein he spent more time in the real world—even if that world was a rather unhappy one.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Random House edition of *Ready Player One* published in 2011.

Level One: 0001 Quotes

🗨️ Playing old videogames never failed to clear my mind and set me at ease. If I was feeling depressed or frustrated about my lot in life, all I had to do was tap the Player One button, and my worries would instantly slip away as my mind focused itself on the relentless pixelated onslaught on the screen in front of me. There, inside the game’s two-dimensional universe, life was simple: *It’s*

just you against the machine. Move with your left hand, shoot with your right, and try to stay alive as long as possible.

Related Characters: Wade Watts / Parzival (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

Wade is sleeping in his Aunt Alice’s trailer in the stacks when he is awakened by the sound of gunfire outside. Fifteen other people live in the trailer, all of them in “abject poverty.” However, Wade is able to escape and forget about his surroundings by playing videogames. In this passage, he describes how the act of gaming soothes him through its simplicity. The real world is chaotic, unpredictable, and complicated. Many of the problems plaguing the planet in 2045 are difficult or impossible to solve, such as the global energy crisis, climate change, extreme poverty, and war. Although videogames can be made intentionally difficult, Wade finds reassurance in the fact that his mission is clear and he knows that a solution is possible.

☛☛ Luckily, I had access to the OASIS, which was like having an escape hatch into a better reality. The OASIS kept me sane. It was my playground and my preschool, a magical place where anything was possible.

Related Characters: Wade Watts / Parzival (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

Wade has explained that, growing up as the child of a single mother with two full-time jobs, the OASIS became his “babysitter.” He spent countless hours inside the game, and it was there that he learned bitter truths about human existence. On the other hand, the OASIS also provided “an escape hatch” out of the darkness of the real world. This passage is one of the moments at which Wade strongly establishes the OASIS as a utopia in contrast to the dystopia of the real world.

Crucially, he links the playful, game-like aspects of the OASIS (“my playground”) with the educational resources it provides (“my preschool”), showing that the combination of the two is what makes the OASIS so special. For a self-proclaimed nerd like Wade, the opportunity to learn is a fun, playful experience.

This passage also implicitly disputes the notion that devoting oneself to an “illusion” necessarily makes a person foolish or crazy. He argues that the OASIS “kept me sane,” thereby implying that it would be *reality* which would cause him to go insane. Once again, the novel challenges the presumed binary opposition between reality and illusion, and suggests that in many ways, illusions can be better and more stable than reality.

Level One: 0002 Quotes

☛☛ My virtual surroundings looked almost (but not quite) real. Everything inside the OASIS was beautifully rendered in three dimensions. Unless you pulled focus and stopped to examine your surroundings more closely, it was easy to forget that everything you were seeing was computer-generated. And that was with my crappy school-issued OASIS console. I'd heard that if you accessed the simulation with a new state-of-the-art immersion rig, it was almost impossible to tell the OASIS from reality.

Related Characters: Wade Watts / Parzival (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

Wade has snuck down to his hideout and logged into the OASIS. His avatar appears inside his high school, and as he looks around him, Wade notes that it is nearly impossible to tell the difference between the OASIS simulation and reality. Once again, the OASIS is shown to be more than just a simulation or illusion. It is its own kind of reality that is arguably no less “real” than the physical world. This is further emphasized by the fact that Wade attends school in the OASIS and not in the real world. The OASIS is not just a zone for frivolous competing and fun, but also a place in which people pursue the serious, important activities like work and education.

Wade’s comment about his “crappy school-issued OASIS console” also hints at the inequality that structures the world in which he lives. Although there are far more opportunities available to poor people inside the OASIS than outside it, it is also true that not everyone has the same kind of access and resources even within the world of the OASIS. Although the OASIS may be a utopia in some ways, it is still afflicted by inequality and injustice.

☛☛ The moment IOI took it over, the OASIS would cease to be the open-source virtual utopia I'd grown up in. It would become a corporate-run dystopia, an overpriced theme park for wealthy elitists.

Related Characters: Wade Watts / Parzival (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

Wade has logged into the Hatchery, a discussion forum for gunters. He explains that a company called Innovative Online Industries (IOI) has hired professional oologists (egg-hunters) in the hope that one of them will find the egg, allowing IOI to take control of the OASIS. In this passage, Wade explicitly articulates the stakes of his participation in

the egg hunt (beyond his dream of personally achieving wealth and glory). If IOI wins the hunt, they will steer the OASIS away from its founding values of accessibility and equality and turn it into yet another opportunity that is only available to the rich. In other words, the OASIS would stop being its own utopia and start resembling the dystopia that surrounds it in the real world.

Level One: 0005 Quotes

☞ The more I'd learned about Halliday's life, the more I'd grown to idolize him. He was a god among geeks, a nerd über-deity on the level of Gygax, Garriott, and Gates. He'd left home after high school with nothing but his wits and his imagination, and he'd used them to attain worldwide fame and amass a vast fortune. He'd created an entirely new reality that now provided an escape for most of humanity. And to top it all off, he'd turned his last will and testament into the greatest videogame contest of all time.

Related Characters: Wade Watts / Parzival (speaker), James Halliday / Anorak

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

Wade has explained that his favorite class at school is Advanced OASIS Studies, an elective in which students learn about the OASIS and its inventor, James Halliday. Wade has spent all his spare time researching Halliday's life and interests for the past five years. As this passage makes clear, Wade idolizes Halliday as a "nerd über-deity" and the quintessential underdog. Halliday did not even attend college, yet became one of the richest and most famous people in the world. Perhaps more remarkably, he did so by creating something that is (at least largely) good rather than evil. The "new reality" that Halliday created is impressive in its technical aspects, but also in the way that it allows people to forget the misery of their lives and "escape" to a better existence.

Level One: 0010 Quotes

☞ I quickly lost track of time. I forgot that my avatar was sitting in Halliday's bedroom and that, in reality, I was sitting in my hideout, huddled near the electric heater, tapping at the empty air in front of me, entering commands on an imaginary keyboard. All of the intervening layers slipped away, and I lost myself in the game within the game.

Related Characters: Wade Watts / Parzival (speaker), James Halliday / Anorak

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 105

Explanation and Analysis

After obtaining the Copper Key, Wade has travelled to Middletown, the planet containing 256 replicas of Halliday's childhood home. He believes that the First Gate can be found within the vintage game Dungeons of Daggorth, which he is now playing on Halliday's first computer. This passage emphasizes how engrossing the OASIS can be, particularly given its multilayered nature, which allows Wade to lose himself in "the game within a game." The implication of this statement is that the more intricate the games and puzzles within the OASIS are, the easier it is for Wade to forget his surroundings and believe in the "reality" of the OASIS. This helps to explain why Wade is so obsessive about Halliday and the egg hunt; the more complicated his research and mission gets, the easier it is for him to forget about his grim existence in the real world.

Level One: 0012 Quotes

☞ Morrow stayed on at GSS for five more years. Then, in the summer of 2022, he announced he was leaving the company. At the time, he claimed it was for "personal reasons." But years later, Morrow wrote in his autobiography that he'd left GSS because "we were no longer in the videogame business," and because he felt that the OASIS had evolved into something horrible. "It had become a self-imposed prison for humanity," he wrote. "A pleasant place for the world to hide from its problems while human civilization slowly collapses, primarily due to neglect."

Related Characters: Wade Watts / Parzival (speaker), Ogden Morrow aka Og

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 120

Explanation and Analysis

After Ogden Morrow is interviewed on the news about Wade and Art3mis' success in clearing the First Gate, Wade narrates Morrow's life story. He explains that Morrow and Halliday were best friends and business partners but that their lives were nonetheless very different. Although Morrow helped set up the OASIS, he left after ten years because he disagreed with what the OASIS had become. This is one of the first times that a serious criticism of the OASIS surfaces in the novel. Whereas Wade sees it is a positive thing that the OASIS is "a pleasant place for the world to hide from its problems," Morrow finds this escapist, utopian dimension of the simulation alarming.

Morrow draws a direct connection between people's willingness to spend as much time as possible in the OASIS and the lack of action that has been taken to solve global problems. Of course, part of why his view on this issue is so different from Wade's is due to their different positions within a highly unequal society. Wade is a poor, powerless orphan who doesn't have any hope for achieving a better life in the real world. It is thus perhaps little surprise that he guiltlessly indulges in the OASIS. Morrow, on the other hand, is wealthy, powerful, and partially responsible for creating the OASIS in the first place. It is within his power to make meaningful change in the world, and—as this passage shows—he regrets the impact his actions have had thus far on increasing the world's problems.

Level One: 0016 Quotes

☝ There was no furniture in the cube-shaped room, and only one window. I stepped inside, closed the door, and locked it behind me. Then I made a silent vow not to go outside again until I had completed my quest. I would abandon the real world altogether until I found the egg.

Related Characters: Wade Watts / Parzival (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 166

Explanation and Analysis

After IOI blows up Aunt Alice's trailer, killing everyone inside, Wade flees to Columbus. He rents a one-room "efficiency apartment" on the 42nd floor of an apartment

building. Wade vows to transform his apartment into an isolation chamber, promising himself that he won't leave until he finds the egg. Wade's obsessiveness comes out in full force, as his entire life is now directed toward a single mission. Although Wade's capacity to approach his task with a tunnel-vision perspective is part of what makes him so successful, the lack of balance in his life is ominous. If Wade fails to find the egg, what will be left to live for?

Level Two: 0017 Quotes

☝ Parzival: I've had a crush on you since before we even met. From reading your blog and watching your POV. I've been cyber-stalking you for years.

Art3mis: But you still don't really know anything about me. Or my real personality.

Parzival: This is the OASIS. We exist as nothing but raw personality in here.

Art3mis: I beg to differ. Everything about our online personas is filtered through our avatars, which allows us to control how we look and sound to others. The OASIS lets you be whoever you want to be. That's why everyone is addicted to it.

Related Characters: Art3mis, Wade Watts / Parzival (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 170-171

Explanation and Analysis

Wade has moved to Columbus and set himself up in a one-room efficiency apartment. The second section of the book, Level Two, begins with a chat conversation between him and Art3mis. Until now, Art3mis has been ignoring his chat requests because they are "rivals" and she does not believe they should be talking. However, she finally relents. In this passage, Wade admits to his crush on Art3mis, which she rejects as illegitimate on the grounds that he doesn't really know who she is. Wade holds the opposite opinion, arguing that in the OASIS people exist as "raw personality." The implication of this is that Wade's crush is more real because he is not distracted by superficial factors such as Art3mis' physical appearance or her social status. He has fallen for her mind.

On the other hand, Art3mis' response about control is also persuasive. Every OASIS user controls what sides of their personality to show and which to hide; each user can

choose whether or not to have their avatar show their real emotions, and can hide specific actions such as cussing or bursting into tears. Furthermore, as Art3mis points out, Wade does have an idea of what she looks like, even if he knows this is artificial. Indeed, as Wade admits, the appearance of Art3mis' avatar is part of what he finds attractive about her. Furthermore, her social status as a famous gunter—though limited to the world of the OASIS and not the “real” world—is also part of her appeal to Wade.

Level Two: 0018 Quotes

☝ "You don't live in the real world, Z. From what you've told me, I don't think you ever have. You're like me. You live inside this illusion." She motioned to our virtual surroundings. "You can't possibly know what real love is."

Related Characters: Wade Watts / Parzival, Art3mis (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 186

Explanation and Analysis

Both Wade and Art3mis have been invited to attend Ogden Morrow's 73rd birthday party at the Distracted Globe, a zero-gravity dance club inside the OASIS. While they are dancing, Wade confesses that he is in love with Art3mis, but Art3mis replies that he doesn't even know her. Here Art3mis repeats her argument that Wade doesn't really know her, and that the side of her he accesses through the OASIS is merely an “illusion.”

In this passage, she admits that she also lives “inside this illusion” and doesn't know what “real love” is. Her words foreshadow the advice Halliday gives Wade at the end of the novel when he argues that although the real world is terrifying and painful, it is the only place where one can find “true happiness.” Art3mis' words here suggest that this “true happiness” is related to the opportunity to form real, human connections.

Level Two: 0019 Quotes

☝ Standing there, under the bleak fluorescents of my tiny one-room apartment, there was no escaping the truth. In real life, I was nothing but an antisocial hermit. A recluse. A pale-skinned pop culture-obsessed geek. An agoraphobic shut-in, with no real friends, family, or genuine human contact. I was just another sad, lost, lonely soul, wasting his life on a glorified videogame.

But not in the OASIS. In there, I was the great Parzival. World-famous gunter and international celebrity. People asked for my autograph. I had a fan club. Several, actually. I was recognized everywhere I went (but only when I wanted to be). I was paid to endorse products. People admired and looked up to me. I got invited to the most exclusive parties. I went to all the hippest clubs and never had to wait in line. I was a pop-culture icon, a VR rock star. And, in gunter circles, I was a legend. Nay, a god.

Related Characters: Wade Watts / Parzival (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 198

Explanation and Analysis

Wade has set up his apartment in Columbus to ensure optimum security, ease, and comfort while he spends all day inside the OASIS. He never goes outside and has spray-painted the apartment's only window black. In this passage, Wade cites the striking and somewhat ironic difference between his life inside the OASIS and his life outside of it. Note that this has shifted since the beginning of the book. When readers first meet Wade, there is more coherence between his circumstances and those of his avatar. In real life, he is poor and powerless, and in the OASIS he is also poor, with a low-level avatar.

However, as Wade's fame and fortune within the OASIS increases, the contrast between this status and his status in the real world becomes more dramatic. As this passage shows, Wade cannot help but ask the question of how much this OASIS fame and fortune means, considering how little it applies in his real life. Although he is wealthier in the real world than he was before (as well as safer and more independent), considering he is a “shut-in” with “no real friends, family, or genuine human contact,” how much is this increased wealth and security worth?

●● I cleared my throat and recited my pass phrase. Each word appeared on my display as I said it. "No one in the world ever gets what they want and that is beautiful."

Related Characters: Wade Watts / Parzival (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 199

Explanation and Analysis

Wade has purchased all the latest equipment to ensure that his access to the OASIS is the most efficient, smooth, comfortable, and realistic that it can be. As he logs into the OASIS, he recites the pass phrase that he chose himself. The line "No one in the world ever gets what they want and that is beautiful" is from the 1986 song "Don't Let's Start" by They Might Be Giants. Wade's choice of this line as his pass phrase reveals much about his state of mind in this part of the novel. Having lost Art3mis and slipping behind in the egg hunt, Wade has taken on a rather depressed, cynical view of life. At the same time, the assertion that it is "beautiful" that nobody gets what they want flies in the face of Wade's single-minded mission to find Halliday's egg. Wade might be proclaiming to accept that nobody gets what they want, but does he really believe this?

Level Two: 0020 Quotes

●● When you owned your own world, you could build whatever you wanted there. And no one could visit it unless I granted them access, something I never gave to anyone. My stronghold was my home inside the OASIS. My avatar's sanctuary. It was the one place in the entire simulation where I was truly safe.

Related Characters: Wade Watts / Parzival (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 200

Explanation and Analysis

Wade has turned his apartment in Columbus into a kind of fort—he never has to leave, and nor does he have to interact with anyone. Inside the OASIS, meanwhile, he has purchased an asteroid and named it Falco. He refers to

Falco as his "stronghold" within the simulation, and there are strong parallels between the apartment in Columbus and this "stronghold."

In both cases, Wade is motivated by cautiousness that borders on paranoia to ensure that no one can access him unless he grants them permission. To some extent, he has been forced into this position due to his sudden and dramatic rise to fame. On the other hand, as a shy nerd Wade also generally prefers isolation to interacting with others. Yet it is possible that—between the OASIS and his apartment in Columbus—he has taken this preference too far.

Level Two: 0023 Quotes

●● The first text adventure game I'd ever played was called Colossal Cave, and initially the text-only interface had seemed incredibly simple and crude to me. But after playing for a few minutes, I quickly became immersed in the reality created by the words on the screen. Somehow, the game's simple two-sentence room descriptions were able to conjure up vivid images in my mind's eye.

Related Characters: Wade Watts / Parzival (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 226

Explanation and Analysis

Wade has travelled to the planet Frobozz, believing it is the location in which the Jade Key is hidden. He explains that Frobozz is one of several planets in the OASIS which create text adventure games—extremely early computer games in which commands are given by entering simple lines of text. Here Wade explains that, from the perspective of someone living in 2045, text adventure games can initially appear too basic to be truly absorbing. However, he admits that once he actually played one, he realized how engaging they were, despite being decidedly low-tech and limited.

Wade's words indicate that playing videogames is not just about being immersed within a flashy, complex, and realistic world. Much of what is appealing about videogames—as with movies, TV, and literature—is their capacity to light up the user's imagination. The enjoyment that people derive from videogames is perhaps just as much about what is occurring in their "mind's eye" as it is what is happening onscreen.

Level Three: 0029 Quotes

☞ Then I was led into a warm, brightly lit room filled with hundreds of other new indents. They were all shuffling through a maze of guide ropes, like weary overgrown children at some nightmarish amusement park. There seemed to be an equal number of men and women, but it was hard to tell, because nearly everyone shared my pale complexion and total lack of body hair and we all wore the same gray jumpsuits and gray plastic shoes.

Related Characters: Wade Watts / Parzival (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 277

Explanation and Analysis

Wade has been arrested by IOI corporate police and taken to the company's headquarters in order to serve out a period of indenturement for the charge of unpaid debt. He has been forced to wear a grey jumpsuit and matching plastic shoes. Wade's description of the indenturement center at IOI headquarters is decidedly bleak, and recalls examples of dystopian prisons and concentration camps from both fiction and real life. Perhaps more than at any other point in the novel, here is when IOI truly lives up to the stereotype of a dystopian evil corporation. The matching uniforms of the indents highlight the way in which IOI totally suppresses people's individuality. The gray color of the uniforms further emphasizes this sense of bland corporate soullessness, where all joy and freedom of expression has been stripped away.

Explanation and Analysis

On the way to Ogden Morrow's mansion in Oregon, Wade has met Aech for the first time in real life. Wade is shocked to find that unlike her white male avatar, Aech is actually a young black woman. On the flight to Oregon, Aech/Helen explains her backstory to Wade. She was raised in Atlanta by a single mother named Marie who believed that the OASIS was a gift to women and people of color in particular, because it allowed them to adopt white male avatars and thus not suffer the burdens of racism and sexism within the simulation. Marie's words highlight another way in which the OASIS is a haven for underdogs, although in a different sense from how this has been shown in the novel thus far. People of color and white women face extra oppression in life, making them underdogs in comparison to white men. Through the OASIS, they are able to escape this oppression and receive the same opportunities as white men.

While Marie is confident that this is a positive dimension of the OASIS, it is also possible to be critical of this way of thinking. Adopting a white male avatar in the simulation arguably helps perpetuate racism and sexism by playing within its rules. For example, the fact that Aech uses a white male avatar perpetuates people's prejudiced assumptions that a top-level gunter could not possibly be a young black woman in real life. Although it is not Aech or Marie's responsibility as individuals to reverse people's prejudice, the fact that they can pretend to be white men within the OASIS speaks to the ongoing presence of racism and sexism. In this sense, Marie's words illustrate the way in which the OASIS can stall real progress.

Level Three: 0033 Quotes

☞ In Marie's opinion, the OASIS was the best thing that had ever happened to both women and people of color. From the very start, Marie had used a white male avatar to conduct all of her online business, because of the marked difference it made in how she was treated and the opportunities she was given.

Related Characters: Wade Watts / Parzival (speaker), Marie Harris

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 320

Level Three: 0035 Quotes

☞ Sorrento had tried to kill me. And in the process, he'd murdered my aunt, along with several of my neighbors, including sweet old Mrs. Gilmore, who had never hurt a soul. He'd also had Daito killed, and even though I'd never met him, Daito had been my friend.

And now Sorrento had just killed Shoto's avatar, robbing him of his chance to enter the Third Gate. Sorrento didn't deserve his power or his position. What he deserved, I decided in that moment, was public humiliation and defeat. He deserved to have his ass kicked while the whole world watched.

Related Characters: Wade Watts / Parzival (speaker), Shoto, Daito, Mrs. Gilmore, Aunt Alice, Nolan Sorrento

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 339

Explanation and Analysis

Wade is in the midst of the final battle at Castle Anorak, in which a massive team of gunters face off against the Sixers. Sorrento, operating the gigantic robot Mechagodzilla, has just killed Shoto's avatar. At this moment, Wade decides to retaliate by humiliating Sorrento. This is a quintessential example of underdog's revenge, in which the injustice of the world is corrected (if only for a moment). The significance of justice and injustice is made clear when Wade argues: "Sorrento didn't deserve his power or his position." Wade has grown up in a world governed by inequality and injustice, in which greedy and cruel people have power and honest, kind people do not. Through the OASIS, he is able to reverse this unfair equation and restore a degree of justice to the world.

Level Three: 0037 Quotes

☝ I cracked up a few times and got hit with score penalties for it. Otherwise, it was smooth sailing. Reenacting the film wasn't just easy—it was a total blast.

Related Characters: Wade Watts / Parzival (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 357

Explanation and Analysis

Having jumped through the Third Gate, Wade is in the midst of the final part of the Easter egg hunt, the second stage of which involves him having to act out scenes from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, just as he previously had to do with *WarGames*. While some of the challenges in the egg hunt have been enormously difficult, this—the penultimate one—is “easy” for Wade. Not only that, but he enjoys it enormously, so much so that the only points he loses are the result of laughing during the contest.

As such, this passage shows that Wade's obsessive nerdiness—his genuine love for all of the videogames and 1980s pop culture to which he has been introduced through his research on Halliday—provides him with a massive advantage in the context and, ultimately, leads him to win. While IOI has infinite resources and a team of experts to draw on, nothing can beat the genuine joy Wade feels in indulging in Halliday's nerdy obsessions.

Level Three: 0038 Quotes

☝ "Listen," he said, adopting a confidential tone. "I need to tell you one last thing before I go. Something I didn't figure out for myself until it was already too late." He led me over to the window and motioned out at the landscape stretching out beyond it. "I created the OASIS because I never felt at home in the real world. I didn't know how to connect with the people there. I was afraid, for all of my life. Right up until I knew it was ending. That was when I realized, as terrifying and painful as reality can be, it's also the only place where you can find true happiness. Because reality is *real*. Do you understand?"

Related Characters: Wade Watts / Parzival, James Halliday / Anorak (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 364

Explanation and Analysis

Wade has obtained the Easter egg and won the contest. When he wins, Halliday appears and tells him that his avatar is now all-powerful and immortal, and that he is in charge of the OASIS. Halliday asks Wade to use his power for good, and gives him a final piece of advice before disappearing. This advice is rather surprising, given that up until this point all the evidence readers have about Halliday points to his incredible shyness and his preference for existing inside the OASIS. Unlike Morrow, Halliday is not known to have had a moment of disillusionment with the OASIS. However, in this passage Halliday reveals that this disillusionment did happen for him.

Right at the end of his life, Halliday came to regret the extent to which he totally immersed himself in the illusion of the OASIS. The glory, fame, and wealth he amassed as the OASIS's creator did not, according to this passage, amount to “true happiness.” Indeed, Halliday's words here reflect the philosophical argument that happiness is made possible by existing alongside with fear, sadness, and pain. The coexistence of these oppositional ways of being is what makes reality “real” and what makes the happiness of the real world “true.”



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

0000

Wade is sitting in his trailer watching cartoons when an emergency news broadcast announces that James Halliday has died. Halliday was the designer of a massive multiplayer videogame called **the OASIS** and was one of the richest people on Earth. Even in the midst of “catastrophic climate change,” war, famine, poverty, and an ongoing energy crisis, Halliday’s death still warrants a special broadcast. Halliday died without friends or family, and he announces via a pre-recorded video message called “Anorak’s Invitation” that he will be giving his entire estate—valued at over \$240 billion—to whoever meets a “single condition.” In typical Halliday style, the video is filled with references to 1980s pop culture.

Halliday recalls the videogames he loved as a child, and discusses the first “Easter egg” ever hidden in a videogame. Halliday morphs into his **OASIS** avatar, Anorak, and announces that he has hidden an Easter egg inside the OASIS. Whoever finds it first will inherit his fortune. He notes that the egg is very well hidden, but that he has left a few clues to help people find it. Three keys appear onscreen, one copper, one jade, one crystal. He recites the first clue, which begins: “Three hidden keys open three secret gates / wherein the errant will be tested for worthy traits.” Halliday wonders aloud if he’s made the hunt too difficult, and then announces that the contest has hereby begun.

At the end of the video Halliday includes a link to his website, which now features a Scoreboard and a downloadable copy of Anorak’s Almanac, a 1,000-page collection of Halliday’s journals. After the video’s release, people all over the world become obsessed with the hunt. People suspect that familiarity with Halliday’s obsessions will help them win the contest, and thus 1980s fashion and music makes a big comeback in 2041. The hunt spawns a whole subculture, with egg-hunters nicknamed “gunters.” However, after a year passes and no one finds the first key or gate, the excitement begins to fade away.

More years pass and more people give up, until suddenly, on February 11, 2045, the Copper Key is discovered by an 18-year-old boy living in a trailer park on the outskirts of Oklahoma City. The narrator, Wade, is that boy, and he will now tell his story.

The opening passage introduces readers to the world in which the novel is set. It is immediately clear that in this world, there is an uneasy coexistence between extraordinary developments in technology (the OASIS), the private wealth of certain individuals (Halliday), and the poverty and devastation that afflicts the rest of the globe.



In several ways Halliday’s Easter egg hunt resembles any hunt, quest, or competition that takes place inside a videogame, as shown by his references to clues, keys, and gates. On the other hand, there are important things that make this hunt unique, the most obvious of which is its massive real-life consequences: whoever wins it will become a multibillionaire. Furthermore, the hunt seems to test not only video-gaming skill, but also “worthy traits,” implying there may be a moral dimension to the competition.



The fact that the hunt inspires so much global attention again emphasizes that the OASIS is no ordinary videogame. Halliday is just one man, but due to the vast extent of his wealth and influence, his personal obsessions come to dictate the interests of people all around the world. Of course, it seems that most people are not genuinely interested in Halliday’s interests—they just want a chance to win his fortune.



Although we don’t yet know any details about Wade’s life, there are already hints that he is an underdog whose success in finding the Copper Key will shock the world.



LEVEL ONE: 0001

Wade wakes up to the sound of gunfire, a common occurrence in the stacks. He is curled up in a sleeping bag in a corner of his Aunt Alice's trailer. 15 people live in the trailer, including two families. Wade uses a 10-year-old laptop he renovated himself; it is his "portable research library" and is filled with almost every videogame made in the 20th century. He plays one of his favorite videogames, *Robotron: 2084*, for a while, before watching an episode of the '80s sitcom *Family Ties*.

Wade's own family is nothing like the one he is watching on TV. He was born to teenage parents who were refugees. His father was killed while robbing a grocery store; his mother, Loretta, had two **OASIS** jobs, as a telemarketer and online escort. When he was a child, the OASIS was Wade's "babysitter." Although being inside the OASIS was in some ways a wonderful experience for Wade, it was also where he discovered the "ugly truth" about the world. He learned that God, Santa, and the Easter Bunny were all "bullshit," and that humanity had brought chaos upon itself through climate change and the energy crisis. The future looks bleak, everyone dies, and heaven and the afterlife are also "total bullshit."

On the other hand, the infinite possibilities afforded by **the OASIS** helped keep Wade "sane." Loretta died after shooting up a bad batch of drugs when he was 11, and after that point he moved in with his Aunt Alice. Alice only agreed to this arrangement to get extra food vouchers from the government, which she kept for herself. A year after Loretta's death, the Easter egg hunt began, which "saved" Wade and gave him purpose.

In the trailer, Aunt Alice demands that Wade hand over his laptop so she can pawn it; after being threatened by Alice's boyfriend, Rick, Wade reluctantly gives it over. He has two spare laptops in his hideout, although these run slower. Aunt Alice's trailer is located in the Portland Avenue Stacks, a tower block of mobile homes powered by solar panels. After the energy crisis, thousands of these stacks appeared on the outskirts of major cities. They are dangerous and prone to collapse.

Wade's nostalgic obsession with the 1980s may seem a little odd given that it was a period before he was even born. However, given that his surroundings in the year 2045 are so grim—characterized by violence and extreme poverty—is there any wonder that he chooses to spend his time dreaming about another decade?



This is the point at which readers are first introduced to the remarkable of scope of the OASIS. Far from just a videogame, it is a place in which people work, have sex, and learn about the world. For someone who embraces the illusion of the OASIS with such eagerness, Wade is perhaps surprisingly disdainful of other things he sees as illusions, from heaven to the Easter Bunny. Clearly, he finds some illusions more tolerable than others.



Wade is not only a nerd and an underdog—he is also a loner. As an only child and orphan living with a cruel, selfish aunt, there is no one in Wade's life who is looking out for him. As a result, the only place where he finds hope and meaning is the OASIS.



The more readers learn about Earth in 2045, the more dystopian it appears. Poverty and the energy crisis make it such that most people do not live in apartment buildings anymore, but are instead cramped into trailers that are then stacked on top of one another, creating a horrifying image of overcrowding and deprivation.



On the way to his hideout, Wade stops at the trailer belonging to his neighbor, Mrs. Gilmore. She is a “sweet old lady” who offers him breakfast, although Wade declines. She is very religious and spends most of her time inside mega-churches in **the OASIS**. Wade keeps going down to his “hideout,” which is an old abandoned van whose seats have been removed. The hideout is Wade’s “Fortress of Solitude” where he hangs out, attends school, and continues his search for the Easter egg. Wade logs into the OASIS; every time he does this, the same words flash up on the screen: “Ready Player One.”

Mrs. Gilmore is the first person in the book shown to be nice to Wade, which suggests that Wade’s dismissiveness of religion may be a little harsh. The fact that Mrs. Gilmore attends church inside the OASIS highlights the fact that everyone in Wade’s vicinity seems desperate to escape reality in one way or another, sometimes immersing themselves in multiple layers of illusion at once.



LEVEL ONE: 0002

Wade’s avatar appears inside his high school. He opens his locker and explains that, aside from schoolbooks, he only has “a few meager possessions”: a flashlight, a sword, a small shield, and leather armor. Wade is poor inside **the OASIS**. The currency used there, OASIS credits, is one of the most stable in the world. Wade’s avatar is thinner and more muscular than he is in real life, and is called Parzival, after the knight who found the Holy Grail. GSS keeps every user’s real identity private and encrypted. At school, Wade has to use his real name, and is known as Wade3.

Just as Wade is an underdog in real life, so is he an underdog in the OASIS, with little money and few possessions. The key difference, however, is that Wade’s lack of wealth and power does not seem to matter as much inside the OASIS. He enjoys existing in the simulation regardless of how powerful he is—the same could not, of course, be said of the real world.



Wade will soon graduate and is not looking forward to it. It won’t be possible for him to attend college, and considering he doesn’t want to become indentured to a corporation his only option is to become a “full-time gunter.” Another student teases Wade; he fires back an insult before muting them. Wade loves the fact that at his **OASIS** school, he can mute people who annoy him. There is no fighting in the school as the planet his school is on, Ludus, is a no-PvP zone.

PvP zones refer to zones in which avatars are allowed to fight each other. In no-PvP zones like Ludus, fighting is blocked by the OASIS software. This highlights the extent to which there is a greater degree of control over life in the OASIS, which—certainly in this instance—makes it a utopia for Wade.



Until sixth grade Wade attended a real-world school, which he hated. He was thrilled by the opportunity to transfer to an **OASIS** public school on Ludus, the planet where all OASIS schools are located. OASIS schools do not face the same financial and practical constraints as real-world schools, and thus have marble hallways, zero gravity gyms, and libraries that contain every book ever written. When Wade first arrived at his OASIS school he thought he had “died and gone to heaven.”

Wade’s school is one of the key examples of why OASIS might be perceived as a utopia. Many of the constraints that restrict life in the real world, making it difficult, frustrating, and exhausting, do not apply within the OASIS. In the context of the OASIS public school system, this lack of restriction is used for a good cause: to enhance learning.



Wade goes into his World History classroom and opens his homepage, the Hatchery, which is a gunter message forum. His favorite threads are dedicated to insulting the Sixers, a nickname for employees of the corporation Innovative Online Industries (IOI). IOI has created an egg-hunting division which employs professional egg-hunters called oologists, hoping that this will allow them to win the egg and take control of the OASIS. Gunter nickname the oologists “Sixers,” because each of their avatar names is their IOI employee number beginning with 6. In exchange for agreeing to hand over the prize to IOI, Sixers receive a regular paycheck as well as extra benefits. The Sixers all have the same avatar: a man wearing an IOI uniform.

Gunters hate Sixers and believe that IOI has corrupted the “spirit” of Halliday’s egg hunt. There are now also gunter “clans,” groups of gunters who work together and agree to share the prize if one of them finds the egg. Wade opens another of his favorite webpages, this one called “Arty’s Missives.” It is the blog of a female gunter called Art3mis who is intelligent and funny, and on whom Wade has a “massive cyber-crush.” Art3mis’ avatar has black hair and a short, curvy body, an unusual choice for female avatars. Wade knows his crush on her is “silly” because he doesn’t actually know anything about her as a person. In real life, she may be a middle-aged man. Art3mis’ blog get millions of hits a day, but she remains down-to-earth despite the fame.

Wade reads Art3mis’ latest post, which is about John Hughes movies. He then opens an instant message window to chat with his best friend, Aech. There is still half an hour until class starts, so they agree to meet in Aech’s chatroom, nicknamed the Basement.

LEVEL ONE: 0003

Chatrooms are “stand-alone simulations” that can be accessed from **the OASIS** but aren’t technically part of it. Aech has programmed the Basement to resemble a rec room from the late 1980s. Although he is only a student, Aech has grown rich from competing in PvP arena games and is even more of a celebrity than Art3mis. The Basement is an “exclusive hangout” for top-level gunters. Aech’s avatar is a tall and handsome white man. Wade doesn’t know Aech’s real name, although Aech once confessed it began with the letter H. The two became friends through their mutual obsession with Halliday; nowadays they are always trying to impress each other with trivia and boast that they will be the first to get on the Scoreboard. Sometimes they conduct “research” together by playing the old-school videogames Halliday loved.

This passage establishes a contrast between the independent gunters and the generic, corporate Sixers. Whereas gunters like Wade approach the hunt as an exciting adventure, the Sixers pursue Halliday’s egg in a far more clinical, soulless way. The Sixers have a total lack of individual distinction and expression, as shown by the fact that they all have the same avatar, wear the same uniform, and are known by a number rather than by their names.



Once again, this passage blurs the line between reality and illusion. Wade knows that it is silly to have a crush on Art3mis because she may be a “middle-aged man” in real life. His observations about her avatar’s appearance are foolish for the same reason, as each OASIS user has complete control over their avatar’s appearance and thus Art3mis may not resemble her avatar at all. Wade’s comment that Art3mis has not let her fame get to her is similarly odd. After all, she is not famous in real life, just in the OASIS.



Although the OASIS is an illusion, there are ways in which it is made to seem like reality—for example, Aech’s choice to name his chatroom “the Basement.”



Wade and Aech’s friendship strikes an idyllic balance between mutual support and playful competitiveness. While they both joke about being better at trivia and being the first person to find the Copper Key, this does not prohibit them from being best friends. Furthermore, Aech doesn’t seem to care that Wade is a random avatar without any money, whereas Aech himself is rich and famous. The relationship between the two avatars not only shows that the OASIS can foster true friendship, but also that friendship does not have to be ruined by competition.



Aech and Wade chat, teasing each other and arguing about Halliday's interests. They are interrupted by the arrival of I-rOk, a gunter who Wade believes is an "obnoxious poseur." Although I-rOk has completed a lot of quests and as a result has a 14th-level avatar, he is clueless about **OASIS** trivia and Halliday's obsessions. I-rOk quizzes Aech and Wade, attempting to catch them out, but he fails to do so. The warning bell flashes, letting them all know it is three minutes until school begins. I-rOk disappears, and Aech invites Wade to return to the Basement after school for a marathon of the TV show *Spaced*.

Wade may not know who Aech is in real life, but he trusts him as a legitimate and authentic gunter. I-rOk, on the other hand, is dismissed as nothing more than a "poseur." For Wade, it is clearly more important to have enthusiastic and comprehensive knowledge about Halliday than to have a high-level avatar. In other words, it is better to be nerdy than powerful.



LEVEL ONE: 0004

Wade likes his World History teacher. All his teachers are good, in part because the **OASIS** school software means they do not have to worry about discipline and can focus on imparting knowledge. It is also possible to take students anywhere in time or space on a "virtual fieldtrip." That morning, Wade's World History class goes to Egypt in 1922 to watch archaeologists discover King Tutankhamen's tomb. The day before, they had traveled to Ancient Egypt during Tutankhamen's reign. In Biology, Wade travels inside the human heart, in Art, he goes to the Louvre, and in Astronomy, he visits Jupiter's moons.

This passage highlights the extraordinary potential of combining a virtual reality simulation with education. Utilizing the OASIS software means that Wade's teachers do not have to worry about financial constraints or badly-behaved students. Not only that, but their teaching is also no longer even limited by the laws of time and space, creating a sense of true possibility and freedom.



At lunchtime, Wade sits in a field by his school. He does not have enough money to travel off-world as other students do. Many even have their own spacecraft and give rides to their friends. **The OASIS** began with only a few hundred planets, populated with "computer-controlled humans, animals, monsters, aliens, and androids." Before long, other game companies launched their own planets within the OASIS. The simulation was divided into 27 sectors, each of which is home to hundreds of planets. The OASIS thus resembles a Rubik's Cube—another 1980s reference. It takes 10 hours to travel across a sector at the speed of light, and such long-distance travel is expensive. It is far quicker to teleport, but that also costs more money.

Although some elements of the OASIS, such as the OASIS public school system, seem to operate relatively free from financial constraints, this is not true for individual avatars such as Wade. The OASIS may have become enormously vast, complex, and intricate, but Wade is prevented from exploring it due to the fact that he is too poor to afford it.



Some zones are powered by magic, and others by technology. Similarly, there are PvP and non-PvP zones, each with its own unique set of rules. There are no "castles, dungeons, or orbiting space fortresses" on Ludus, and neither are there any monsters or aliens, as it was designed solely as an educational planet. This is disastrous for Wade because the only way he can increase his avatar's power level is by earning experience points (XPs) through fighting or completing quests. Many **OASIS** users do not care about their avatar's power level or the competitive aspects of the simulation. However, if Wade wants to find the egg, he knows he will have to travel through the most dangerous parts of the OASIS, and will not survive if his avatar remains at the 3rd level, where it currently is.

Another utopian aspect of the OASIS lies in the fact that each user can engage with it on their own terms and get out of it what they want to. While gunters like Wade see the main mission of their time in the OASIS as finding Halliday's Easter egg, others enter the simulation for completely different reasons. However, as Wade points out, it is not necessarily easy to engage with the simulation exactly how one wants to. If an avatar doesn't have much money or many experience points, there is little that they can do within the simulation.



Aech's avatar is on the 30th level. Wade considers being on the 3rd level "a colossal embarrassment." He has tried to get a part-time job, but unemployment has never been higher and even fast food restaurants have two-year waiting lists for job applicants. Wade therefore remains stuck on Ludus, which he compares to being in "the world's greatest video arcade without any quarters."

Because OASIS credits are treated as a genuine currency in the real world, the recession afflicting reality also has an impact on the OASIS. This is reflected in the fact that unemployment is so high and it is almost impossible to get a job.



LEVEL ONE: 0005

Wade's favorite class is a senior elective called **Advanced OASIS Studies**. The class is a breeze considering that Wade spends all his spare time researching Halliday and his creation. Wade worships Halliday as the ultimate "nerd über-deity" who invented an "entirely new reality." Today, the class is discussing a biography of Halliday that Wade has already read four times. Wade has to resist the urge to correct his teacher's errors and omissions, and instead makes a mental note of them.

Wade may be worse off than most other people in the OASIS, but he is rich in knowledge—particularly knowledge about Halliday. Thus far, however, the only advantage that Wade's extraordinary knowledge about Halliday has given him is the ability to ace his Advanced OASIS Studies class.



Halliday was born on in 1972 in **Middletown, Ohio**. His family was working-class; his father was an alcoholic and his mother had bipolar disorder. He was a fiercely intelligent but shy child who was obsessed with computers, comics, science fiction, fantasy, and videogames. In high school, he befriended another boy, Ogden Morrow, and Halliday was soon embraced by Morrow's friend group of "mega geeks." Halliday and Morrow would go on to be a world-altering pair of best friends and business partners. Halliday created his first game, titled *Anorak's Quest*, when he was 15. Morrow encouraged and helped Halliday to sell the game, and before long they started their own company, Gregarious Games.

Already there are some parallels emerging between Halliday's life and Wade's. Both suffered unhappy childhoods with troubled parents/guardians, and both choose to escape this unhappiness through certain obsessions. Of course, there is a meta level to Wade's obsessions, in that he is obsessed with Halliday's obsessions, inheriting Halliday's interests second-hand.



Neither Halliday nor Morrow went to college; instead, they devoted all their time to Gregarious Games. Morrow was charismatic, and was thus able to handle the business and other public-facing sides of the operation. Halliday remained eccentric, intense, and odd. He rarely gave interviews and the ones he did give were largely nonsensical. Halliday struggled to understand why others didn't share his obsessions. Wade notes that it is believed Halliday had Asperger's syndrome or another variety of "high-functioning autism."

In many ways Halliday is the typical nerd-genius. He is highly intelligent, but does not have the academic achievements to show it—instead, he eschews traditional schooling and focuses on creating his own inventions. Furthermore, Halliday's social awkwardness is also tied into his extraordinary intellect. His unique mind makes it difficult for him to interact with others.



Halliday and Morrow were multimillionaires by the age of 30. Where Morrow used his fortune to travel the world, Halliday focused on acquiring collectibles. In 2012, Gregarious Games relaunched as Gregarious Simulation Systems (GSS), simultaneously debuting what would become GSS' only product: the Ontologically Anthropocentric Sensory Immersive Simulation, aka **the OASIS**. The OASIS was not the first massive multiplayer online game, but it was far bigger and better than anything that had existed before. Halliday and Morrow also designed it to be as free and accessible as possible—a way for anyone to escape from reality.

Part of what made **the OASIS** so the unique were the trademark OASIS visor and haptic gloves, which provided total sensual immersion into the simulation. Additionally, the OASIS was capable of hosting five million users. When the OASIS first came out, advertising campaigns framed it as “an online utopia.” The game only charged a one-off 25c admission fee. It quickly became the most popular thing on the internet, such that “the terms ‘OASIS’ and ‘Internet’ gradually became synonymous.” People worked, played, fell in love, and got married inside the simulation. It was now where most of humanity chose to spend all their spare time.

LEVEL ONE: 0006

Wade's final class of the day is Latin, which he chose to take because Halliday had taken Latin. Wade finds it boring, and—through a glitch in the school software—he secretly reads *Anorak's Almanac* during class. He has read every book and watched every film mentioned in the *Almanac*, alongside mastering all the TV shows, music, YouTube videos, comic books, and, of course, videogames. He is able to get all this research done because he has “no life whatsoever.”

Wade discovers the “first real clue” to the Easter egg hunt while studying the history of “pen-and-paper role-playing games.” He notices that some of the letters inside the *Almanac* have notches through them, and he is able to assemble these letters into a meaningful message. The message promises that the Copper Key is situated in “a tomb filled with horrors” and that anyone who wants a place on the Scoreboard has “much to learn.” Six months after Wade discovers the clue, a “loudmouth MIT freshman” announces that he's discovered it too, and the clue soon comes to be known as “the Limerick.” However, since the Limerick's discovery four years ago, the Copper Key has still not been found.

The fact that Halliday chooses to amass collectibles while Morrow travels the world indicates that even with massive wealth and power, Halliday was still too afraid of the real world to want to spend much time in it. He makes the OASIS free so that anyone who feels similarly afraid of reality can escape it as well.



The OASIS' impressive technological developments, alongside its radical accessibility, again emphasize the impression that it is a utopia. On the other hand, the fact that it is so all-consuming is somewhat dystopian. Can anything that makes people neglect reality on this scale—no matter how many great qualities it has—really be a good thing for humanity?



Once again, the novel implies that there are perverse advantages to being a nerd with “no life.” Furthermore, the joy Wade finds in his intensive Halliday research questions what is meant by the word “life” in this context anyway. After all, what is more fulfilling than indulging in whatever brings meaning to your life?



This passage suggests that while Wade may have the knowledge and skills to successfully complete the hunt, his lack of money, power, and fame may mean that other people get the credit for breakthroughs in the hunt while he remains in obscurity. On the other hand, the passage also implies that there may be advantages to Wade's anonymity. Wade's use of the phrase “loudmouth” indicates that it is unwise to be boastful about one's breakthroughs.



Wade knows that there is an old Dungeons & Dragons supplement called *Tomb of Horrors*, a detailed map of a labyrinth filled with “undead monsters.” He identifies the parallels between D&D and **the OASIS**, and soon realizes that Halliday is the OASIS equivalent of a D&D dungeon master. Wade is convinced that Halliday has recreated the D&D Tomb of Horrors in the OASIS and hidden the Copper Key inside it, but can’t figure out where the Tomb is. It might be on the planet Gygax, which is named after one of the creators of D&D and is filled with D&D recreations. However, gunters have thoroughly searched the planet and found nothing. Then, in the middle of Latin class, Wade has a breakthrough.

LEVEL ONE: 0007

Wade’s Latin teacher is teaching the class the Latin word for “learn,” *discere*, when an idea suddenly pops into Wade’s head. Students are people who have “much to learn,” and he is on a planet filled with students. Could the Tomb of Horros be hidden on Ludus? Wade double-checks the definition of *ludus* in his Latin dictionary, realizing that it means both “school” and “sport” or “game.” He is so excited that he falls out of his chair, and tries to calm himself down. Ludus is not the only planet that houses schools and universities. However, it is the home of the **OASIS** public school system, which Halliday founded and personally funded.

The *Tomb of Horrors* booklet specifies that the tomb is located near “a low, flat-topped hill.” It’s possible that this could be in one of the generic forests on Ludus that lie between schools. No one would think to search Ludus for the Copper Key, so if it is hidden on the planet Halliday must have hidden it there because he wanted it to be found by a schoolkid. Class ends, and Wade immediately pulls up a map of Ludus. It is a pretty small planet, about the same size as the moon, and it is always daytime there. Wade uses an image recognition plug-in to compare the *Tomb of Horrors* booklet to the map of Ludus, and before long the software identifies a matching location. He exclaims in triumph, convinced he’s found the Tomb.

Wade calculates that the hill is 400km away from his school. If he runs there it will take three days; he could teleport in minutes for a few hundred credits, but he doesn’t have any. Aech would lend him the money, but he doesn’t want to raise any suspicions. Wade suddenly remembers that that night, his school’s football team will play an away game at a school that is only an hour away from the tomb. His school will give him a free teleportation voucher to attend the game, which he immediately retrieves from the school office. He runs to the nearest transport terminal, enters an empty booth, and slides his voucher into the slot. Instantly, Wade appears in an identical booth near the other school.

Recall that in the beginning of the novel, Halliday wondered aloud if he had made the hunt too difficult. In this passage, it is clear why Halliday decided to make it such a challenge. There is a whole army of nerds and obsessives with comprehensive knowledge of all of Halliday’s interests. As a result, there needed to be an extra edge of difficulty in order to ensure that the hunt has only one “worthy” winner.



Here is one of the first examples of Wade’s underdog status giving him a direct advantage in the hunt. Unlike most other gunters, he is restricted to just one planet and can’t go travelling around the OASIS searching for the egg. On the other hand, he is fortunate to be confined to the one planet where the Copper Key may actually be hidden.



The fact that Halliday wanted a schoolkid to find the Copper Key suggests that he may have wanted to tip the scales, giving those with a natural disadvantage an added advantage at the beginning stage of the hunt. Perhaps he even predicted or desired that the hunt be won by someone like Wade—a poor, isolated geek just like Halliday himself had been, yet one with tremendous insight and a genuine passion for Halliday’s obsessions.



Wade does not only have the advantage of thousands of hours of research on Halliday and his obsessions on his side. He also has the kind of quick-thinking and ingenuity that allows a person to be a successful videogame player. He is able to think strategically, foreseeing potential problems (like making Aech suspicious by asking him to borrow money). As a result, Wade is able to quickly solve the problems that appear before him.



Wade dons his armor, shield, and sword and runs toward the forest. He gets a phone call from Aech but lets it go to voicemail. Aech asks where Wade is and if he still wants to join the *Spaced* marathon. Wade texts back, saying that he has too much homework and can't make it. He then rereads the *Tomb of Horrors* module, and is concerned by the detail that there is an evil demi-lich, Acererak, inside the tomb. A lich is a terrifying undead creature who was once a wizard or king.

Wade studies the map and realizes that if Halliday's Tomb of Horrors is anything like the D&D module, he will surely die instantly. If Wade's avatar is killed, it would not be a total disaster, because it is only at the 3rd level. He resolves that if he is killed, he will come back every night, gaining XPs and increasing in levels until he finally gets the Key. Wade climbs up the hilltop and sees that the entrance to the Tomb is an exact replica of the D&D module. He finds the spot where the Tomb's entrance is supposed to be and begins to dig. Before long, he finds the mouth of the tunnel, and—after pulling his sword from his scabbard—enters the Tomb.

LEVEL ONE: 0008

Inside, the Tomb remains an exact replica of the D&D module, and Wade is thus able to dodge all the trapdoors hidden within it. He moves through each chamber of the dungeon, finding thousands of coins on the way. He picks them up and they are immediately converted into 20,000 credits, the most Wade has ever had. He receives an equal number of XPs through finding them, and he also finds magical items, such as a Flaming Sword, Ring of Protection, and Full Plate armor. Armed with these discoveries, he now feels invincible.

Everything continues to go smoothly until Wade reaches the Pillared Throne Room. To his surprise, Acererak is sitting in there. According to the D&D module, Acererak is not supposed to appear until a much deeper chamber. Wade knows that if they fight, he will be killed instantly. **The OASIS** does not allow users to save their place and log out, so his only choice is to face the demi-lich in this moment. If he is killed, he can return the next day, as the Tomb will be reset at midnight, OASIS time. Acererak greets Wade by his avatar's name and asks what he seeks. Wade replies that he is seeking the Copper Key, and bows respectfully. Acererak assures him that he is in the right place, and then asks how he can know if Wade is worthy of possessing the Key.

While some elements of the OASIS, such as Wade's school, are remarkably similar to reality, others—such as the undead demi-lich Acererak—are completely fantastical. It is this combination of fantasy and reality within the simulation that makes it so engrossing and exciting, as well as times somewhat terrifying.



Once again, Wade is set up as an underdog with little to no chance of survival, let alone success. However, as this passage makes clear, it is not only Wade's knowledge and ingenuity that increase his chance of success, but also his determination. He is undeterred by the thought of his avatar being killed off because, if that happens, he has simply resolved to come back again and again until he is finally able to retrieve the key.



As soon as Wade gets the mere opportunity to compete in the hunt, his fortunes start to improve immediately. Finally, all the research he has done on Halliday and his obsessions is paying off, allowing him to dodge the trapdoors in the Tomb and stay alive. Furthermore, now that he is facing an actual quest, his XPs begin to skyrocket.



Wade fears that he will have to face Acererak in battle, in which case he will simply have no chance of beating him, as there is such an extreme power differential between the two of them. However, Acererak's question if Wade is "worthy" indicates that this is not simply going to be a showdown of might. Indeed, recall that "worthy" is the same phrase used in the first clue Halliday provided at the beginning of the hunt. It is becoming clear that winning the hunt is about more than possessing power alone.



Wade asks for the opportunity to prove his worth, and Acererak challenges him to a joust. Acererak's throne instantly transforms into a coin-operated videogame cabinet featuring a 1982 game called Joust. Acererak explains that it will be best out of three; if Wade wins, he will receive the Copper Key, and if he loses, he will die. Joust is an arcade game in which both players ride birds—an ostrich and a stork—and joust each other, as well as enemy knights. It is one of Aech's favorite games and there was a period when they played every day. Wade became so good that he would always beat Aech, but now he is "a lot rustier than I thought."

Acererak wins the first game, and the second gets off to a bad start for Wade. However, Wade then begins to learn Acererak's "playing style," which helps him. He notes that talented human players will always have an advantage over AI players in a game like Joust. Wade wins the second game just in the nick of time. The final game is the longest by far, but Wade eventually beats Acererak once again. They bow at one another, and to Wade's surprise, Acererak transforms into Halliday's avatar, Anorak.

Suddenly "triumphant" music from the *Star Wars* soundtrack fills the room, and Anorak hands Wade the Copper Key. At the same moment, Wade gains 50,000 XPs, instantly raising his avatar to the 10th level. Anorak bids Wade farewell and disappears. There are two lines of text written on the key that read: "What you seek lies hidden in the trash on the deepest level of Daggorath." Wade immediately knows that this refers to an old line of computers from the '70s and '80s, which included Halliday's first computer, and that this computer must be the location of the First Gate.

Wade knows that he will find a replica of Halliday's first computer in **Middletown**, the planet upon which Halliday recreated his childhood hometown. *Dagorath*, meanwhile is a word in J.R.R. Tolkien's invented language Elvish, and "Daggorath" with two g's must refer to the 1982 game *Dungeons of Daggorath*, which Halliday claims was the videogame that made him want to be a game designer. Middletown is far away on Sector 7, but Wade is now rich enough to teleport. There are eight hours until the next school day begins, and Wade knows he should sleep, but he also knows he won't be able to. Just as he is sprinting out of the Tomb of Horrors, an avatar appears and begins to speak to him.

Suddenly, it is revealed that Acererak is challenging Wade to a game within a game: not testing Wade's OASIS skills, but rather his skills at vintage coin-operated videogames. Although this skill is a kind of power, it is a power that Wade possesses, because it is based in research, practice, and obsession. The fact that Wade developed his Joust skills with Aech shows that their friendship will help him succeed in the contest.



Wade's observation that human players will always have an advantage over artificial intelligence is important. While computers are in some ways far more intelligent and skilled than the human mind, they have unique shortcomings. If humans exploit these shortcomings, then they can beat an AI opponent.



Wade's immediate jump from the 3rd to the 10th level demonstrates the extent to which he was an underdog whose success was extremely unlikely. On the other hand, the fact that he immediately knows what "the trash on the deepest level of Daggorath" refers to indicates that his powerful level of knowledge may be enough to guide him to victory.



The detail that the school day starts in eight hours reminds readers that Wade is having to juggle the demands of searching for Halliday's egg in addition to keeping up with the normal tasks of being an 18-year-old kid. At this point, it is unclear whether he will be able to carry on maintaining the life of an ordinary 18-year-old as the search for the egg becomes more and more intense.



LEVEL ONE: 0009

The avatar standing in the Tomb demands to know who Wade is. As she steps forward, he realizes that it is Art3mis. Wade is speechless, but eventually manages to give a fake name, an obscure quote from the 1986 film *Highlander*. Art3mis immediately sees through it and asks how he beat Acererak. Wade realizes that she has been coming to the Tomb of Horrors and playing Joust but has been unable to win. Wade lies and tells her Acererak beat him, and Art3mis notes that Wade is the first avatar she's seen in the Tomb. Wade lies again and boasts that he has loads of points despite being beaten by Acererak, which surprises Art3mis, as she is on the 52nd level and has almost died each time she fights him.

Art3mis observes that Wade looks like “a low-level wimpazoid” and that he's not being honest with her. Wade tries to leave, and Art3mis asks why he's not staying considering that he still needs to beat the lich. However, Art3mis pleads with him to stay, apologizing for calling him a wimp. Wade admits that he is only on the 10th level, but Art3mis points out that she should respect him as a “fellow gunter.” She begins to rant about how she has been trying to beat Acererak for three weeks without success, adding that her grades are suffering as a result. Her worst fear has come true: discovering that another gunter has found the Tomb. However, now that Wade is here, she is excited to finally be able to discuss the Tomb with another person.

Wade is charmed by Art3mis, and they both laugh. They introduce themselves, and Wade admits that he is a big fan of hers. Art3mis gives him her card, which he exclaims is the “coolest contact card” ever. Although Wade desperately wants to keep talking to her, he tells her he has to go, reminding her that they are competitors. She asks if they can still be friends, and Wade tentatively says yes. However, seconds later, she exclaims with rage that he is a “lying bastard.” She has seen the name Parzival appear on the Scoreboard, and the news headlines proclaiming that a mysterious avatar, Parzival, has found the Copper Key.

Furious, Art3mis yells that she has been trying to beat Acererak for five weeks, and Wade has beat him on the first try. She realizes that Wade must have the clue leading to the location of the First Gate and that he is trying to head there now. She casts a Barrier Spell on him, trapping him in place. He accuses her of being “evil” and promises that he will still beat her to the First Gate. Art3mis warns him that he's famous now, and that Parzival will soon become “a household name.”

Once again, readers see how much of an underdog Wade is and how truly unlikely it was for him to beat Acererak. On the other hand, while he may be on a measly low level in comparison to Art3mis, he is her equal when it comes to knowledge of the 1980s pop culture that will be essential to success in the hunt. Despite this immediate connection, at this stage it seems unlikely that a friendship will develop between them, seeing as Wade keeps lying to her.



Art3mis obviously feels conflicted about Wade's presence. On one hand, she is made nervous by him, as she realizes that he is a serious threat to her success in the hunt. As a result, she aggressively teases him. On the other hand, she is relieved to not be so isolated and to finally have someone to discuss the hunt with—hence why she apologizes and then begins gushing to him. This difficult tension between alliance and independence runs throughout the novel.



While Wade and Art3mis' budding friendship was tenuous, for a moment it seemed possible that they could truly become friends and that neither of them would be so alone in facing the hunt. However, the revelation of Wade's lies immediately brings this crashing down, reminding Art3mis that they are rivals who cannot truly trust each other.



Although Art3mis is angry with Wade, it is also clear that she begrudgingly respects him. Of all the things she could do to him, a barrier spell is relatively harmless. Furthermore, her comment that he will soon become extremely famous contains a hint of kindness, as she is encouraging him to be prepared.



Art3mis asks what Wade will do with Halliday's fortune if he wins, and Wade replies that he will buy a nuclear-powered spacecraft, load it with a lifetime's worth of supplies along with the products of human culture, and invite friends on board. He would then set out on a mission to find out a habitable, Earthlike planet. Art3mis questions why he wouldn't help all the people on Earth who are starving, adding that if she wins the money, she will use it to feed the hungry. Then she will move on to solving the energy crisis. Wade replies skeptically, but before she leaves, he gives her a tip for beating Acererak. Art3mis says nothing and walks in to meet the lich. Wade waits for 15 minutes until the spell dissolves, before fleeing the Tomb.

Depending on one's point of view, it would be possible to judge either Wade or Art3mis as having an unwise plan of what they would do with the prize money. Is Wade selfish and immature to want to escape Earth altogether, leaving humanity to suffer and die out? Or is Art3mis naïve to think that she would be able to solve world hunger, even if she was a multibillionaire? Perhaps both of them are naïve in their own ways—yet Art3mis' plan is at least undeniably more altruistic than Wade's.



LEVEL ONE: 0010

As Wade exits the Tomb, he receives dozens of missed calls and text messages from Aech, who has seen his name appear on the Scoreboard. Wade ignores them and immediately teleports to **Middletown**. He walks hesitantly, as the planet is a PvP zone. The planet is covered with 256 copies of Halliday's hometown, and Wade hopes that he will find one that doesn't have any gunters in it. Just as he turns on to Halliday's streets, he hears a trumpet fanfare and sees Art3mis' name appear on the Scoreboard. She has received 1,000 fewer points than Wade, presumably because he was the first to find the Key. He sprints toward Hallidays' house.

Wade may have begun the hunt in a highly-isolated, solo manner, but now that his name is on the Scoreboard, he will never have the same level of privacy again. Furthermore, now that Art3mis has obtained the Copper Key, he has to worry about her catching up to him in the hunt—something he brought on himself by giving her the clue that finally allowed her to beat Acererak.



The house has no people in it, but otherwise it is a perfect replica of Halliday's childhood home. Wade finds it confusing that Halliday chose to recreate a place in which he had been so unhappy. As he steps into Halliday's bedroom, he shivers. Wade powers up Halliday's ancient computer and retrieves Dungeons of Daggorath from a shoebox, inserting the cartridge into the computer. He quickly loses himself within the game, forgetting that in reality he is still in his hideout in the stacks. It takes a long time, but eventually Wade beats the Evil Wizard of Daggorath and wins the game. After he does so, Halliday's old printer prints off a single page reading "Congratulations! You have opened the First Gate!"

This scene shows that Wade is following in Halliday's footsteps—literally. Although Halliday was a shy and awkward loner during his life, in death he has created a competition that forces people to see the world from his perspective and come to know the environment in which he grew up. Wade thus becomes a kind of protégé to Halliday despite the fact that Halliday dies before they can ever meet in real life.



Wade suddenly sees an iron gate appear in the bedroom wall, and he slides the Copper Key into it. The gate swings open, revealing a mass of stars. He hears a voice say: "My God it's full of stars." Without hesitating, Wade jumps through.

Wade's lack of hesitation betrays a trust in the OASIS, the hunt, and Halliday—a trust that serves him well as he is required to complete increasingly scary quests. The phrase "My God it's full of stars" is associated with the film 2001: A Space Odyssey.



LEVEL ONE: 0011

Wade's avatar appears inside an old video arcade, midway through a game of Galaga. He catches a glimpse of his reflection in the game's screen and sees Matthew Broderick's face. Immediately, he realizes he is Matthew Broderick's character in the 1983 movie *WarGames*. His surroundings are an exact replica of the film, which was one of Halliday's absolute favorites. He tries to pull up his **OASIS** map, but gets nothing, which means he is in a stand-alone simulation separate from the OASIS. He realizes he must be in the middle of a quest, and that if he completes it he will clear the First Gate. However, he is unsure about what he is actually supposed to do.

Suddenly, another character—a young boy—approaches Wade and says hi. The character's name is Howie. Wade pauses and sees a flashing sign saying, "Final Dialogue Warning!" Luckily, Wade knows the movie by heart and thus responds with the correct line: "Hi, Howie!" He receives 100 points, and when he also says the next line—"How's it going?"—correctly, he receives another 100. As Wade continues to act out the movie, he feels exhilarated.

At first Wade thinks acting out the whole movie will be easy; however, it turns out to be harder than he expected. He not only has to recite the correct dialogue, but also act out all the character's actions. He receives warning signals when he makes a mistake, and he is sure that if he makes too many his avatar will be killed. Wade will realize in hindsight that he is the first person playing a whole new kind of videogame: interactive versions of movies and TV shows called Ficksyncs. By the movie's conclusion, Wade is exhausted; he has been awake for 24 hours. When it finally ends, the movie disappears and Wade is transformed back into Parzival.

Another riddle appears, this time explaining that "the Captain conceals the Jade Key in a dwelling long neglected." The clue also mentions a "whistle" and "trophies." Wade realizes that he has cleared the First Gate, and he sees that his avatar now has 110,000 XPs and that he is now at the 20th level. Art3mis remains behind him with 9,000 points. No other avatars are on the Scoreboard.

Wade runs down to the Hallidays' kitchen and grabs the car keys. He drives the Hallidays' car to the bus station and teleports back to Ludus. By the time he takes his visor off, it is 6:17am and the hideout is freezing. He dreams that he is confronted by an army of Sixers and gunter clans while holding a glass egg. They grab the egg from him and tear his body "to shreds."

Wade's materialization in the middle of the film WarGames reminds readers that the OASIS is far from a typical videogame. Although it has quests, mazes, and monsters like any game, the OASIS is also an immersive world that allows for possibilities such as placing users inside a movie. Given these possibilities, it is little wonder that the OASIS is so wildly popular and that most people choose to spend all of their free time inside it.



This quest may not involve fighting a demi-lich, but in its own way it is perhaps just as exhilarating. Once again, Wade's encyclopedic knowledge of Halliday's obsessions proves to be the secret to his success.



Being forced to act out Matthew Broderick's character in WarGames may be a dream come true for Wade in some ways, but this passage reminds readers that, as fun as this quest is, it is also difficult and exhausting. Wade may be existing inside a virtual reality simulation, but he nonetheless must rely on his mortal body and work within its physical limitations.



Up until this point, Wade's ascent to success in the hunt has been smooth, if not exactly easy. He is still comfortably ahead of the only other avatar on the Scoreboard and has jumped 17 power levels in the past 24 hours. Is this early run of luck too good to be true?



This passage draws attention to the gulf between Wade's reality inside the OASIS and his real reality on planet Earth. While everything is going wonderfully for him in the OASIS, in real life he is cold, exhausted, and alone.



LEVEL ONE: 0012

Wade sleeps for 12 hours, missing school. He wakes up to find that Art3mis has also cleared the first gate, although she remains 1,000 points behind him. He hears news commentators speculate that he and Art3mis are working together as members of the same gunter clan. The news program then interviews Ogden Morrow at his home in Oregon. Morrow says that it is exciting to finally see avatars on the Scoreboard, and if Parzival and Art3mis are smart they will keep their real identities secret. He adds that the Sixers will likely “use every dirty trick at their disposal” to find the Copper Key and First Gate.

Wade smiles as he realizes that Morrow knows more about the hunt than has been widely assumed. In the mid-1990s, Morrow moved in with his high school girlfriend Kira Underwood, a “quintessential geek girl,” who gave Halliday the nickname Anorak. Kira was one of GSS’s first employees, although after marrying Morrow she resigned from her position as an artistic director. Five years later Morrow resigned too, later writing in his autobiography that he was disturbed OASIS had gone from being a game to a “self-imposed prison.” There were rumors that Morrow and Halliday had big argument at this time and that their friendship was subsequently over.

Morrow and Kira founded a software company called Halcydonia Interactive, which produced free educational games for children. In 2034, Kira died in a car accident, and Morrow led a private life, running Halcydonia Interactive alone. When Halliday died, reporters hassled Morrow, convinced that he had information about the Easter egg hunt. Morrow claimed that he and Halliday had fallen out, although the fact that Halliday left Morrow his collection of coin-operated videogames seemed to contradict this. Morrow said he didn’t know about the hunt, and that he thought Halliday had designed it because he wanted people to share his obsessions.

Wade has received 2 million emails since clearing the First Gate, but only two are from his contacts: one from Aech, and one from Art3mis. Aech insists that Wade call him immediately, which Wade does. Aech exclaims: “Congratu-freak’-lations, man!” He then reveals that he is outside the Tomb of Horrors himself, having figured out that the Copper Key was probably on Ludus. Aech asks for tips and Wade refuses to give any; Aech smiles in response, unsurprised. Aech warns Wade that I-rOk has been telling people that Parzival is a student on Ludus. Wade wishes Aech luck, and before hanging up, advises him to practice his jousting skills.

We don’t yet know much about Ogden Morrow or his relationship to the hunt. However, his brief comments to the news channel indicate that he is on Wade and Art3mis’ side—at least insofar as they are positioned against the Sixers. Although Morrow doesn’t address Wade and Art3mis directly, his comment about keeping their identities secret is a subtle, indirect form of advice.



Morrow’s life story begins in a rather utopian manner. He gets together with the “quintessential geek girl,” works as a videogame designer with his best friend, and achieves huge success at a young age. However, as this passage makes clear, this story also has a darker edge. Unlike Halliday, Morrow was skeptical about whether the OASIS truly had a positive effect on society, and felt that the simulation was more dystopian than utopian.



This passage further illustrates the tragedy that came to color Morrow’s life. The two people he was closest to are now dead, leaving him alone and isolated. Furthermore, he must deal with aggressive attention from people who hope to use him in order to learn more about Halliday’s hunt. This information suggests that it is little wonder Morrow retreated into obscurity.



This passage proves that Wade and Aech have a deep, genuine friendship. It would be easy to imagine Aech being jealous and angry at Wade for having passed the First Gate, particularly considering Wade did it without telling Aech first. However, instead Aech warmly congratulates his friend. Once again, readers see the difficulty in balancing friendship and rivalry as Wade at first refuses to give Aech any tips; the fact that he eventually does is further testament to the importance of their friendship.



Wade then opens the email from Art3mis. She thanks him for the tip and says it was “an honor” to meet him. However, she adds a PS warning that he won’t be in the top spot for long. Wade replies that she now owes him a favor, adding a winking face, and tells her that he thinks he’s figured out the next clue already. He offers to hang out in a chat room if she ever feels like it. After sending the email, Wade tries to concentrate on the Jade Key clue, but he cannot stop thinking about Art3mis.

Wade and Art3mis’ relationship has moved quickly from acquaintanceship to rivalry to flirtation, with the possibility of friendship still hanging uncertainly in the air. While Wade clearly enjoys their dynamic, the fact that he is so distracted by her arguably does not bode well for his future success in the hunt.



LEVEL ONE: 0013

The next day, Aech clears the First Gate, and on Monday Wade returns to school. The reinvigoration of the hunt means that half of the students and teachers are absent. I-r0k posts on the gunter message boards announcing that Wade and Aech are students on Ludus. Before long, two other avatars named Daito and Shoto clear the First Gate within minutes of one another. Wade realizes that the Jade Key clue is a quatrain, but he still cannot figure out what it means. After school ends on Friday, Wade sorts through his emails. He receives offers to sell his true identity and life story to various news channels, as well as endorsement offers from companies willing to pay in OASIS credits.

In this passage, readers are reminded of the very serious real-world consequences of the Easter egg hunt. Without even having won, Wade is offered deals that will instantly make him rich. The stakes are driven home by the fact that half of the students and even the teachers at Wade’s school do not attend on Monday, highlighting how pervasive interest in the hunt is among the young and old alike.



Wade writes back agreeing to all the endorsement offers on the condition that he can keep his true identity a secret. Wade calculates that the endorsement money will allow him to move out of the stacks and live in his own apartment for at least a year. Wade then sees that he has received 5,000 versions of the same email from IOI offering a “highly lucrative business proposition.” The email is signed: “Nolan Sorrento, Head of Operations.” Wade knows that IOI is trying to recruit him. His first instinct is to delete all their emails, but then decides that he will meet with them via chatlink.

The fact that IOI sends Wade 5,000 emails alludes to their desperation to recruit him. At the same time, it also demonstrates their overwhelming power and seemingly infinite resources. IOI seems eager to show off this power to Wade in order to persuade him to join them, yet—given Wade’s feelings about IOI—this seems unlikely to have a positive effect.



Wade researches Nolan Sorrento, learning that he has a PhD in Computer Science and that he used to be a game designer, which is obviously why he was recruited to work on the egg hunt for IOI. Wade sends him a chatlink invitation.

Nolan Sorrento’s trajectory is an example of a different route for the nerd/underdog archetype. Rather than remaining a loner, Sorrento joins IOI in order to wield the corporation’s power.



LEVEL ONE: 0014

Through the chatlink session, Wade appears on a grand observation deck on IOI-1, the planet that serves as IOI headquarters. Chatlink sessions allow an avatar to appear in limited form in a different location and interact with their surroundings, and are mostly used to conduct business. Wade is greeted by a receptionist seated at a desk emblazoned with IOI's logo. While he waits for Sorrento, Wade tries to turn on his vidfeed recorder, but it is disabled. Sorrento appears and introduces himself, telling Wade it is an honor to meet him. Wade responds in a skeptical and aloof manner.

Wade believes he is the first gunter to be given a tour of IOI-1. Gunter has dreamed of blowing it up before, but has never been able to get past the planet's defense systems. Wade asks if the OASIS version of IOI's headquarters is a replica of the real headquarters in Columbus, and Sorrento confirms that this is true. IOI is based in Columbus because it has a better power system that doesn't suffer blackouts like other US cities. GSS is based in Columbus too, and for this reason the city has become a "high-tech Mecca."

Sorrento brings up Wade's newfound fame, and Wade tells him to get to the point, pretending not to be intimidated. Sorrento brings Wade to the Oology Division, which Wade sarcastically calls "SuxOrz Central." When Wade points out that IOI's tactics for finding the egg are "cheating," Sorrento disagrees, saying the hunt has no rules and calling Halliday an "old fool." Sorrento then offers Wade the position of "Chief Oologist," Sorrento's second-in-command. The position comes with a million-dollar-a-year salary, with an extra million bonus to start and a \$25 million bonus if Wade finds the egg.

Wade asks if he can have a few days to consider, but Sorrento refuses. Sorrento gives a long speech disputing the negative impression gunter has of IOI. He argues that, contrary to popular belief, IOI wants to "make the OASIS a better place." Wade agrees, but asks for \$50 million if he finds the egg and says that he wants Sorrento's job, Chief of Operation. He continues that Sorrento gives him "the creeps" and that he wants him fired. After a moment, Sorrento tells Wade that his bosses have agreed to his demands and that they are willing to hire him immediately.

IOI are putting on a show of kindly welcoming Wade. However, Wade is clearly skeptical of this show of good faith. The fact that IOI have stopped him from recording the chatlink session arguably confirms that there may be darker motives lurking beneath their supposedly friendly and generous gesture.



There is something unlikely and humorous about the fact that in this imagined version of the future, Columbus, Ohio is the "high-tech Mecca" in which superrich corporations choose to base themselves. Indeed, the seemingly arbitrary status of Columbus is testament to the enormous impact of Halliday's legacy on the world, as it was Halliday who chose to base GSS in his home state.



Rather than pretending to be older and wiser than his years during his meeting with Sorrento, Wade chooses the opposite route—embracing his own childishness and behaving in a rude, mischievous way. This helps him mask his own intimidation and undermines Sorrento by refusing to take him, his offer, and IOI seriously.



Sorrento's claim that IOI wants to "make the OASIS a better place" is a typical example of corporate doublespeak, as IOI's plans for the OASIS are the opposite of making it a better place. Wade continues to antagonize Sorrento, leveraging his sudden position of power in order to undermine the power of Sorrento and, by extension, IOI.



Suddenly, Wade changes his mind and tells Sorrento and IOI to go “fuck a duck.” Sorrento gives him one final offer. When Wade refuses, Sorrento reveals that IOI knows Wade’s real name, his birthday, and his location. He then explains that IOI has been spying on Wade and that they have wired Aunt Alice’s trailer with explosives. If Wade leaves the chatlink session, Sorrento will press the detonator and Wade and his family will die. Sorrento explains that he learned this information through Wade’s **OASIS** school record. Wade considers for a moment, reflecting that IOI has no reason to keep him alive after he helps them win, and that they might be bluffing. He tells Sorrento that Halliday was “smarter than all of you put together” and that IOI will not win. Then he logs out.

This passage is a perfect example of the precariously thin line between courage and foolishness. Faced with the terrifying extent of IOI’s power and the real, life-and-death stakes of its impact, Wade stays calm enough to realize that he might as well risk death, seeing as the company has no reason to keep him alive anyway. Of course, his decision-making process may well have been different if his relationship with Aunt Alice was closer; in this sense, Wade’s isolation proves to be an advantage.



Wade sits in his hideout. At first nothing happens, but after a minute he hears a massive explosion, and sees that the stack containing Aunt Alice’s trailer has collapsed, bringing the adjacent stacks down with it. With horror, Wade realizes that Aunt Alice, Rick, Mrs. Gilmore, and everyone who lived in Aunt Alice’s trailer are now dead. He considers calling the police within **the OASIS**, but realizes that no one would believe him. He decides to “lay low” until his first endorsement check comes through and then flee. First, he needs to warn Aech.

This is a major turning point in the novel. Suddenly, it becomes clear that IOI are not only willing to kill Wade’s avatar in order to win the hunt, but also Wade himself. Furthermore, despite the difficulties in his relationship with Aunt Alice, she and his neighbors were the only people Wade knew in real life. Thanks to IOI they are dead, and he is now more alone than ever.



LEVEL ONE: 0015

Back on Ludus, Wade sees IOI gunships flying through the sky above him, and is relieved to remember that Ludus is a no-PvP zone. Wade calls Aech via vidfeed. Aech discusses the Sixers descending on Ludus and says that he is going to kill I-rOk. When Wade tells Aech that IOI blew up Aunt Alice’s trailer, Aech promises: “We will make them pay for this.” Wade warns Aech to flee his home, but Aech assures him that he stays on the move and won’t be found. He suggests that they invite Art3mis, Daito, and Shoto to the Basement that evening, and Wade agrees.

Once again, Aech proves himself to be a supportive, selfless friend. Rather than focusing on the danger he is likely in, Aech promises Wade that they will seek revenge on IOI and offers the Basement as a place where the other top gunters can meet. Despite his celebrity status, Aech is more willing than perhaps any other character to form alliances and put others’ needs above his own.



Feeling lonely, Wade logs into the Basement an hour early. All the news channels are showing the Sixers on Ludus. Art3mis arrives, and admiringly calls the Basement “the coolest chat room I’ve ever seen.” Wade feels jealous of how well Aech and Art3mis are getting along. Daito and Shoto arrive; they are both Japanese avatars wearing traditional samurai armor. Art3mis tells the others that the Sixers have found the Tomb, and that they have installed two force fields in order to prevent other gunters from entering the Tomb (while allowing Sixers access). Daito laments that there are “no laws” in **the OASIS**, and Shoto exclaims that “the Sixers have no honor.”

The fact that the top five gunters in the OASIS are meeting up to discuss developments in the hunt should generate optimism. However, at this point it is clear that each of the characters in this passage feels defeated by the actions of IOI. Although each gunter is different, they generally share the desire to respect Halliday’s hunt and play with “honor.” Unfortunately, IOI do not share this approach.



Wade tells the others about the Sixers' attempt to kill him. He then tells them about the elaborate Oology Division at **IOI**, with its team of scholars and experts. Daito suddenly grows suspicious that Wade is proposing they start their own alliance. He points out that there can only be one winner, and he and Shoto log out of the chatroom. Left by themselves, Wade, Aech, and Art3mis agree that they do not actually intend to start an alliance. Art3mis bids them goodbye and leaves. Aech observes that Wade clearly has a crush on her. They discuss the next clue and Wade briefly fears that someone might be listening in on him. Aech assures him that he is just being paranoid, and offers to loan him money or a place to stay if he needs it. Wade thanks him and exits.

The interaction between Art3mis, Aech, and Wade after Daito and Shoto leave suggests that it is possible for rivals to pursue a friendship. Friendship, this passage implies, is not the same thing as an alliance, and it is possible for rivals who are competing with one another to nonetheless remain on friendly, mutually supportive terms. After all, the gunters may be competing with one another, but they also have a common enemy: IOI.



LEVEL ONE: 0016

The Scoreboard quickly fills up with Sixer employee numbers, the first of which belongs to Sorrento. The **OASIS** Public School board decides to evacuate Ludus due to the disruption caused by the Sixers and creates a copy of the planet called Ludus II where school can continue. A battle between Sixers and gunters breaks out on the original Ludus, and the gunters eventually manage to break through the force field and enter the Tomb, where 95% of the them are defeated by Acererak and killed. The Sixers abandon the force field but continue sending thousands of avatars into the Tomb to obtain the Copper Key.

This passage highlights the unfair nature of the competition between the gunters and IOI. While the gunters eventually manage to disable the Sixers' force field, most of them are not skilled enough to defeat Acererak. Meanwhile, because the Sixers are not acting as individuals, but are relying on a special team of experts, they are easily able to defeat the demi-lich and proceed to the next stage of the competition.



Before blowing it up, the Sixers planted materials in Aunt Alice's trailer to make it look like a meth lab that exploded by accident. When his first endorsement check comes through, Wade buys a first-class, one-way bus ticket to Columbus, taking only his most important belongings with him. The bus has armor plating and bulletproof glass, and almost every passenger on it wears an **OASIS** visor. It takes several days to reach Columbus, and Wade spends the entire time logged into the OASIS.

Faced with IOI's frightening power and complete lack of morality, Wade has no choice but to flee his former home. Luckily, the fact that he now has as moderate amount of wealth means that he can purchase the security and transportation resources that are only available to the rich.



Wade buys a new identity on the **OASIS** black market using his newfound fame as leverage. He assumes the identity of Bryce Lynch, a 22-year-old with a perfect credit score and degree in Computer Science. He finds a one-room apartment in Columbus and pays the first six months' rent upfront. He notices that the apartment building was once a Hilton hotel. The apartment, which is on the 42nd floor, is opened using a retinal scan. There is no furniture inside. Wade promises himself that he won't leave until he finds the egg.

With his family and neighbors dead, Wade is completely alone in the world, and the only thing he has to live for is the hunt. His vow not to leave his new tiny apartment until he finds the egg speak to the single-minded nature of his existence. For Wade, the hunt has become more than a competition; it is now the whole purpose of his life.



LEVEL TWO: 0017

The chapter opens with a chat conversation between Wade and Art3mis, who until now has been ignoring Wade because they are competitors and thus “sworn enemies.” Art3mis points out that everyone wants to know who Wade is in real life, and laments that people think she is a man in reality. Wade admits that he has had a crush on her since before they even met. Art3mis responds that he doesn’t really know her, and they continue to playfully quiz each other about their “real” identities. Wade suggests that they have an “online romance,” but Art3mis brushes him off.

Art3mis tells Wade that she is 19 and studying Poetry and Creative Writing in college. They realize that they are both orphans. Art3mis says that she basically looks like her avatar. Wade asks if they can keep chatting and Art3mis refuses, warning that if he emails her she will block him. They say goodbye and end the chat.

Wade starts emailing Art3mis. At first, she doesn’t reply, but after she does they begin corresponding every day, then meeting in chatrooms. They play games, watch movies, and listen to music. Wade is stunned by how much they have in common, admitting: “I’d never had such a powerful, immediate connection with another human being before.” He stops caring that they are supposed to be rivals. Although Wade stopped attending school when he moved to Columbus, he still has enough credits to graduate in June. Now that he is no longer in school, he is supposed to be dedicating himself full-time to the hunt, but all he can focus on is Art3mis.

Wade spends the rest of his time raising the level of his avatar by completing quests, some of which he does with Art3mis. He continues to think about the quatrain, but remains stumped by its meaning. Finally, he has a breakthrough while watching 1980s cereal commercials one morning. He realizes that the “captain” and “whistle” mentioned in the clue refer to Cap’n Crunch. However, he still has no idea about the location of the key.

Meanwhile, Wade dreams of meeting Art3mis in real life, and neglects his friendship with Aech. Aech warns that Wade’s relationship with Art3mis is risky, but Wade proceeds anyway. When Wade and Art3mis travel around **the OASIS** together, they do so in disguise. The only occasion when they don’t do this is when they perform in the Rocky Horror Picture Show together. Wade describes this as the best night of his life; after the performance, Art3mis kisses him for the first time. He decides to reveal his feelings to her.

Once again, Art3mis is shown to be conflicted. She cannot decide whether she wants to continue her friendship with Wade, as shown by her oscillation between wanting to speak to him and ignoring his chats. She also seems conflicted about the extent to which people recognize her for who she really is. She is annoyed that people think she is a man, yet insists that Wade does not actually know her.



Wade’s crush on Art3mis is sincere, yet he doesn’t always respect her boundaries. Although she previously expressed hesitation about their being friends, Wade ignores this and chooses to pursue the friendship anyway.



Although Wade’s life is in most ways far from normal, there are several moments—such as this passage—which remind readers that beneath his fame and trauma, he is still an ordinary 18-year-old boy. As such, he is prone to the weaknesses that afflict teenage boys, including letting themselves be distracted from their goals by crushes on girls.



Whereas at the beginning of the hunt success came to Wade in one quick and rather smooth swoop, now his progress is more piecemeal and irregular. This may be because the challenges have become more difficult; however, it may also be because he is distracted by Art3mis.



At this point, Wade and Art3mis’ relationship appears to be too good to be true. This point is emphasized by Aech’s warnings and the fact that Art3mis was initially resistant to even being friends with Wade, let alone more.



LEVEL TWO: 0018

Wade receives an email from Ogden Morrow inviting Wade to his 73rd birthday party, which will be “one of the most exclusive gatherings in the OASIS.” The invite features an anti-Sixer logo, and notes that the party will take place that night at the Distracted Globe, a zero-gravity dance club that Morrow owns on the planet Neonoir. The club is in a PvP zone governed by both magic and technology, making it highly dangerous. Neonoir is a cyberpunk-style world designed to resemble William Gibson’s 1984 science fiction novel *Neuromancer*.

Wade drives up to the club in a DeLorean (a 1980s sports car) he acquired through completing a quest. The club is spherical, and the lack of gravity means that the dance “floor” is in its center. Art3mis approaches Wade wearing a “gunmetal blue dress” and looking beautiful. Morrow’s avatar, Og, appears in the DJ booth and waves to the crowd. Wade and Art3mis dance, and Art3mis transforms her legs into a mermaid’s tail. As they slow dance, Wade tells Art3mis that he is in love with her. Yet once again, Art3mis insists that he doesn’t actually know her. She says that their relationship has gotten “out of hand”; when Wade asks if she is breaking up with him, she replies that they were never together.

Wade and Art3mis’ conversation is interrupted by a massive boom erupting overhead. Sixers descend on the club, shooting blaster pistols at the guests, some of whom fire back. Wade notices that the Sixers seem to be aiming for him and Art3mis. They both shoot back at the Sixers, wiping them out. Og then steps out of the DJ booth and vaporizes all the Sixers using red lightning. He puts on a track by Blondie and encourages the guests to return to partying. Wade sees Art3mis look at him, then leave.

LEVEL TWO: 0019

Wade has spray-painted the only window in his apartment black, so no natural light comes in. He orders everything he needs online, and deliveries arrive through the high-security War Door Wade has installed, which means he never actually has to interact with anyone. He doesn’t use the kitchen, ordering takeout or microwaving frozen meals instead. He has constructed an **OASIS** “immersion rig” out of the latest pieces of technology to make his time spent in the OASIS the most vivid and comfortable it can be. He also purchases a sex doll, but after “several highly unproductive days” inside a virtual brothel he decides to throw it away.

Cyberpunk is a subgenre of science fiction closely associated with the work of the science fiction writer William Gibson, and particularly his debut novel [Neuromancer](#). Cyberpunk combines advancements in artificial technology with lawlessness and social chaos. Most cyberpunk worlds are considered dystopias, rather than utopias.



Wade and Art3mis may be in a magical zero-gravity club at a 73-year-old celebrity’s birthday party, but their attention nonetheless largely remains on their own romantic relationship. Clearly, the two of them have conflicting views on the nature of their relationship and whether it should go forward. Whereas Wade insists he is in love with Art3mis, her reply that he doesn’t know her and that they were never together implies that Wade is living inside a willful delusion.



The arrival of the Sixers serves as a reminder that there are far more serious issues at play than Wade and Art3mis’ relationship. While the immense power of Morrow’s avatar means that he wipes out the Sixers with ease, their presence at his birthday party shows that the gunters continue to be under serious threat.



Wade has designed his apartment to allow optimum ease of access to the OASIS. In doing so, he has placed himself in a rather dark scenario in which he has no contact with the outside world whatsoever. The fact that he paints his window black indicates that his level of single-mindedness and determination is rather unhealthy. His use of the sex doll and visit to the online brothel further emphasizes his loneliness and isolation.



The system agent software of Wade's computer—somewhat like a virtual personal assistant—is named Max, and resembles the 1980s talk show host Max Headroom. As Wade gets out of bed and prepares for the day, Max jokes around with him. Wade works out every day using gym equipment in the apartment. He started doing so in an effort to lose the weight he gained after moving to Columbus, and before long, he is in “near-perfect” health. He has begun to feel that the immersion rig is a kind of self-imposed prison. He cannot deny that he is an “agoraphobic shut-in” and a “sad, lost, lonely soul.” On the other hand, in the OASIS he is an “international celebrity” and “legend.”

This passage points out a dilemma for OASIS users. In order to achieve the kind of fame, wealth, and success that Wade now enjoys inside the OASIS, it is seemingly necessary to abandon one's real-world life and devote oneself entirely to the simulation. This in turn raises the question of whether such an exchange could ever be worth it. Even though Wade lives a life of fame and glory in the OASIS, how much does this mean in the context of his life of real-world isolation?



LEVEL TWO: 0020

Wade's avatar appears on the command center of Falco, the private asteroid he's bought—the “cheapest planetoid” available. Falco is the only place in **the OASIS** where Wade feels safe. Now that he is 18, he can vote in the OASIS elections, and he votes to reelect the current president and vice-president, who are gunter favorites because they protect user rights. GSS has recently added a feature called personal OASIS vidfeed (POV). It allows users to pay to stream their own TV network, and many choose to livestream their own lives. On Wade's channel, Parzival-TV, he streams 1980s movies, TV, ads, and music videos. The channel receives millions of views every day.

This passage further reveals the extent to which the OASIS was designed as an accessible, fair, and democratic space. It might seem odd that a videogame has a government and elections, but consider how much time people spend within the OASIS and how much activity is conducted there. Considering that in the world of the novel “the OASIS” and “the internet” are synonymous, it in fact makes sense that the simulation should have a democratically elected government.



Art3mis also has a popular POV channel, Art3mivision. She has also started her own fashion line. She has blocked all contact with Wade since Morrow's party eight weeks ago, and she no longer posts to her blog. Even though Wade is now on the highest level, the 99th, he still completes quests to keep himself busy and distracted from his own loneliness. Having neglected his friendship with Aech because of his relationship with Art3mis, Wade and Aech have grown apart. Wade laments that “in less than six months, I'd managed to wreck both of my closest friendships.”

Wade attempted to convince himself that his life's only purpose was completing the hunt. However, here it is clear that he has now come to value his relationship with Art3mis even more than the hunt. Indeed, his obsession with Art3mis has negatively impacted the rest of Wade's life, taking away the few other things that gave it meaning.



On the other hand, Wade did find a chance to reach out to Daito and Shoto when he discovered a Japanese-language quest on the planet Tokusatsu. He asked for Daito and Shoto's help with the quest, and the three of them spent a week completing it together. They not only received thousands of XPs and credits in return, but also a rare artifact called Hayata's Beta Capsule that allows an avatar to transform into Ultraman for three minutes at a time. Wade insisted that the brothers keep the artifact because it belongs “in Japanese hands.” From then on, the three became friends.

Wade's newfound friendship with Daito and Shoto is the only silver lining at this point in his life. It demonstrates that, despite Wade's increasing isolation, he is still able to see the value in altruism and alliance. Although Wade is in the midst of a dark moment in his life, he still remains the same person who is good at heart.



Wade's expenses are high, and he supports himself through a part-time job doing **OASIS** technical support. He was able to secure the job through having Bryce Lynch's credentials and resume. Wade describes the OASIS helpdesk as "my own private virtual hell." He works 10-hour shifts, which go by painfully slowly. One day, after his shift ends, he finds thousands of new emails in his inbox. He immediately realizes that Art3mis has found the Jade Key.

While Wade is stuck in a rut, Art3mis has progressed to the next stage of the hunt. This makes the fact that she broke up with him even more bitter. Art3mis remains in the utopian dimension of the OASIS, embarking on new adventures and achievements, whereas Wade finds himself trapped in a boring, lonely, and repetitive dystopian side of the simulation.



LEVEL TWO: 0021

A few months after everyone cleared the First Gate, the Sixers purchased an artifact from an auction called Fyndoro's Tablet of Finding. Artifacts are unique, super-powerful magical objects which give their owners special abilities. There are only a few hundred artifacts in existence so it is always news when one is sold. Fyndoro's Tablet allows its owner to find another avatar, and thus could be used to beat others and win the Easter egg hunt. When it was auctioned there was a massive bidding war between gunter clans and the Sixers, but the Sixers eventually won.

This chapter begins with even more grim news. Again, the power of the Sixers is shown to be so immense that it is almost impossible to imagine beating them. Although the gunters put up a good fight, they simply cannot compete with the Sixers' disproportionate level of wealth, influence, and information.



After Art3mis finds the Jade Key, the Sixers use the Tablet to establish that she is in Sector 7, and immediately head there in droves—inadvertently revealing the location of the Jade Key to everyone else in **the OASIS**. Newspaper headlines announce that Parzival has been "dethroned" and that Art3mis is now the top gunter. Wade curses himself for having wasted time pining over the girl who has now beat him in the contest. He feels a renewed sense of determination and returns to analyzing the quatrain. He studies the map of Sector 7, and it suddenly occurs to him that the key might be hidden in the replica of the GSS Museum, which is on the planet Archaide.

Wade may be at his lowest moment, but it is at this point that he has his next breakthrough. This development in his trajectory suggests that sometimes it is necessary to sink to rock bottom to become aware of one's own mistakes and begin to rectify them. While everything was going well for Wade, he couldn't understand that his obsession with Art3mis would ultimately come to damage his chances of success at the hunt. Now he realizes the truth.



Wade instructs Max to power up his spaceship, the *Vonnegut*. He notes that Archaide is a PvP zone and upgrades his gear in preparation. As he flies out of orbit, he notices a few of the "crazed fans" and "aspiring bounty hunters" that hang around Falco, hoping to get access to him. He often has no choice but to kill these avatars. Wade decides to use the nearest stargate—a teleporter for spaceships—in order to get to Archaide, because he is in a hurry.

This passage explores the bizarre nature of celebrity. While Wade feels like a failure, he is surrounded by "crazed fans" who idolize him as a hero. In reality, of course, neither view is quite right: Wade is neither entirely a hero or failure, but rather just a person.



LEVEL TWO: 0022

Archaide is home to **the OASIS**' largest classic videogame museum, and the planet itself resembles an old videogame—its scenery never changes and it does not look real. Older OASIS users have coded arcades from their own childhoods on the planet, each of which is filled with ancient arcade games. Overall, Archaide resembles a “massive underground multilevel labyrinth” in which it is easy to get lost. Wade runs until he arrives at the GSS Museum, however he soon realizes that the museum has not been coded to be interactive, and thus the Jade Key cannot be located here. Disappointed, he concludes that Archaide is a “dead end.”

Wade takes a different route out of the planet, and on his way finds an “underground city” filled with pizza places, bowling alleys, and arcades. He is stunned to find somewhere called Happytime Pizza, a recreation of the pizza place Halliday frequented as a child in **Middletown**. Inside, there is a Robotron game machine and a note saying that anyone who beats the owner’s high score will get a free large pizza. Wade keeps looking around and finds a Pac-Man machine with a note saying, “Out of order.” He plugs it in and is surprised to see that it works.

Wade realizes that he’s found something special—not “the Easter egg,” but “an Easter egg.” In order to secure the egg, he will need to play a perfect game of Pac-Man. It is tricky, and he has to start over several times. However, he eventually gets into the swing of things. While playing, he sees Aech’s name rise on the Scoreboard and realizes that Aech has now also found the Jade Key, but he does not let this ruin his flow. After six hours, he finishes a perfect game. “Game Over” flashes on the screen and a quarter tumbles toward him. He knows it’s possible that the quarter has magical properties, but at that moment all he can think of is Art3mis, Aech, and the Jade Key.

Wade receives an email from Aech saying that they are “officially even now” and that Aech is repaying his debt to Wade. Attached to the email is the instruction manual for the 1980 text game Zork. Wade suddenly realizes that the Jade Key is hidden on a planet called Frobozz, which is not far from Archaide in Sector 7. He sets off immediately.

Halliday is not the only character in the novel who is nostalgic for his youth. The fact that many OASIS users have coded the arcades of their childhood on Archaide suggests that nostalgia is a widespread phenomenon in the world of the novel. This makes sense given the fact that planet Earth in 2045 is something of a paradise lost. Older people alive at this time were born into a reasonably prosperous and stable world, only to see that all fall away. No wonder they are nostalgic.



The name “Happytime Pizza” is somewhat ironic given that Halliday’s childhood was decidedly unhappy. This irony in turn speaks to the strange nature of nostalgia, which can make people look back fondly on a period that was not actually happy at the time.



Wade’s discovery of the Easter egg inside the Pac-Man machine serves as a reminder that sometimes mistakes and failures can lead to unexpected good fortune. Wade previously considered Archaide a “dead end,” and while he has not managed to find the Jade Key on the planet, he has found something else that may well benefit him in the long run. This passage thus indicates that the route to success is not always straightforward or linear.



Wade’s decision to give Aech the tip that helped him beat Acererak is now being rewarded with Aech doing the same for him. In this case, friendship is shown to benefit success in the hunt, rather than hinder it.



LEVEL TWO: 0023

The Frobozz is one of several planets that serve as a “shrine” to the earliest days of the OASIS. Wade explains that text adventure games create a virtual game environment through text; players use simple text instructions in order to play the game. After being given the tip by Aech, Wade can now see how the quatrain hints that the Jade Key is hidden in one of the most beloved text adventure games, Zork. He uses his Ring of Teleportation to get to Frobozz, hoping this means he will reach it undetected by the Sixers. Frobozz features 512 identical copies of the Zork playing field distributed across the planet; Wade chooses one at random and teleports there.

Wade approaches the white house in front of him and enters the kitchen. He retrieves the box of Cap’n Crunch from the cupboard and finds the toy whistle inside. However, when he blows it, nothing happens. He goes down the staircase in the house and uses his notes about Zork to help him navigate the maze of the game, collecting treasures along the way. After he is done, Wade returns and blows the whistle again. This time it transforms into a key, and Wade’s score increases by 18,000 points—putting him between Art3mis and Aech. The key is wrapped in silver foil, which Wade removes. The key is inscribed with a message: “Continue your quest by taking the test.”

Suddenly, Wade hears the Sixers arriving, and knows that gunters won’t be far behind. He dashes to the *Vonnegut* and lifts off, narrowly escaping heavy fire. The *Vonnegut* is nonetheless damaged, so Wade stops at Joe’s Garage to have it repaired. He sends Aech an email thanking him for the tip and checks his feed for news about the battle taking place on Frobozz. There are reports of scores of gunters and Sixers are being killed, and Wade also sees that Sorrento’s score has increased, meaning he has also found the Jade Key. Shoto’s score also rises on the Scoreboard, but there is no change to Daito’s. Suddenly, Daito’s name disappears from the board, and Wade knows he must have been killed.

LEVEL TWO: 0024

The Battle of Frobozz remains intense and at first only seven Sixers manage to obtain the Jade Key. However, they then install a force field, and suddenly the number of Sixers with the key jumps dramatically. Wade returns to Falco and meditates on the meaning of the line inscribed in the key. He falls asleep, and awakes to the horrifying news that Sorrento’s score has increased once again, indicating that he has cleared the Second Gate. Wade begins to have a panic attack. He calls Aech and Art3mis, but can’t get through to either of them. He tries to talk to Max, but this ultimately only makes him feel more lonely.

This chapter continues to explore the theme of nostalgia. It may seem strange that anyone in a game as rich, complex, and vivid as the OASIS would have any interest in text adventure games, given that these are extremely basic. However, Wade’s genuine love of videogames—from the very earliest and simplest to the most technologically advanced—again gives him an advantage in the hunt.



All the years Wade spent alone making notes on his “research” are truly paying off now. Of course, Wade would likely not have done all of this research in the first place if it had not been something that genuinely interested in him. This passage thus again emphasizes the value in following one’s passions.



While Wade has finally gotten back into the game, this good fortune is tainted by the fact that the Sixers are continuing to ruthlessly pursue the egg at any cost. Given that they are approaching the hunt with such bloodthirsty gusto, is there any hope of Wade and his friends beating them while still respecting the integrity of the contest? Or will they have to sink to the Sixers’ level and employ dirty tactics if they want any chance of winning?



This moment in the novel emphasizes the fact that artificial intelligence and virtual reality simulations cannot fill the void created by lack of human contact. Although Wade’s relationships with Art3mis and Aech are mediated through the OASIS, he is comforted and fulfilled by the knowledge that there are real humans operating their avatars. Without this assurance with Max, he only feels more alone.



Soon, another ten Sixers clear the Second Gate, too. Two days later, Sorrento's score increases again, proving that he's obtained the Crystal Key. Wade is horrified, concluding that "the bad guys were going to win." He thinks about what he will do if the Sixers win the hunt. He will give away all his **OASIS** possessions to someone in his fan club and leave his apartment for the first time since arriving in Columbus. He will go up to the roof of his apartment building, breathe the fresh city air, and then commit suicide by jumping off.

Wade's thoughts are interrupted by a vidmail message from Shoto saying that Daito left Wade something in his will. Wade wonders why Daito left a will for his avatar when Shoto explains that Daito will not create a new avatar ever again. He assures Wade he will explain everything in person.

The fact that Wade plans to commit suicide if the Sixers take over the OASIS may at first seem dramatic. However, by this point it is clear that the OASIS is not just a game, but rather the only thing that makes Wade's life bearable. If it is turned into an elitist, fascist "theme park" as Wade fears, any trace of purpose and meaning he has will disappear.



Just like Wade's plans to commit suicide if the Sixers win the hunt, Daito's death will blur the distinction between reality and illusion. Is it only Daito's avatar that's dead, or was he killed in real life?



LEVEL TWO: 0025

Shoto arrives on Falco dressed in black mourning robes. He and Wade sit together, and Shoto explains that the Sixers killed Daito—not in **the OASIS**, but in real life. They broke into Daito's apartment and threw him off his balcony, framing it as a suicide. Shoto then tells Wade that he wants Wade to know his real name, Akihide. Wade in turn introduces himself using his own real name. Shoto then explains that he and Daito were only brothers in the OASIS; in real life, they'd never met. He seems afraid that Wade will judge him, but Wade assures him that for gunters, the OASIS "is the only reality that has any meaning."

Daito and Shoto met in an OASIS support group for *hikikomori*, young people who shut themselves in a room and do not engage with the real world. Shoto explains how Daito was killed in the middle of the Battle of Frobozz. Daito had deployed the Beta Capsule against the Sixers, giving Shoto a chance to seize the Jade Key. As Shoto emerged from the white house, he heard Daito shouting that he could hear someone inside his apartment—however, at that point his voice cut off. Daito's avatar disappeared, while Shoto's avatar was able to escape in his spacecraft just in time.

Shoto gives Wade the Beta Capsule, telling him that Daito wanted him to have it. Wade tries to refuse, but eventually accepts it with gratitude. Shoto admits that he has a "new quest": getting revenge. They consider how long it will take for the Sixers to clear the Third Gate. Wade assures Shoto that "it's not over until it's over. And it's not over yet."

Even at this very dark moment in the text, there is hope to be found in the sympathy and solidarity Wade extends to Shoto. Shoto is embarrassed about admitting that someone he only knew inside a simulation was like a brother to him. But as Wade explains, he understands the feeling that relationships inside the OASIS are the only ones that are truly meaningful. This adds a sense of hope to the terrible tragedy of Daito's death.



Daito's mention of hikikomori links the novel's exploration of reality vs. illusion to real-world issues. Hikikomori exist in our present day reality, and their existence raises the same questions about loneliness, the lure of virtual existence, and the meaning of life as Wade's obsession with the OASIS. Is confining oneself to a virtual realm a sign of fundamental disturbance, or is it sometimes a reasonable response to the horrors of reality?



Daito's death creates a new kind of rock bottom from which Wade and Shoto must now emerge. Like Art3mis' discovery of the Jade Key, this dismal turn of events provides Wade with a new burst of determination and commitment to the contest.



LEVEL TWO: 0026

Wade is at home analyzing the silver foil in which the Jade Key was wrapped when he is suddenly reminded of the 1982 film *Blade Runner*. An idea dawns on him, and as he says the word “unicorn” aloud the foil bends itself into an origami unicorn—“one of the most iconic images” from the movie. Suddenly he knows exactly what “test” he must take to find the Second Gate. *Blade Runner* was one of Halliday’s top ten favorite films; it is based on a novel by Philip K. Dick, who was one of Halliday’s favorite authors. The film features “replicants” of humans who can only be distinguished from real humans by a special test issued by a Voight-Kampff machine. The machine is housed in in the Tyrell Building, replicas of which are all over **the OASIS**.

Wade travels to a cyberpunk-themed world in Sector 22 called Axrenox and quickly finds a copy of the Tyrell Building on it. He lands the *Vonnegut* on the roof and rides the elevator down to the 440th floor, where he shoots dozens of Tyrell security guard replicants in order to get past. He enters a recreation of the office of Eldon Tyrell, founder of the Tyrell Corporation, and spots the Voight-Kampff machine inside. He puts the key inside, and immediately another portal to a field of stars opens. Wade jumps inside.

Wade materializes inside a bowling alley with “disco-era décor” and a sign reading **Middletown** Lanes. He feels himself being pulled toward a door that reads “Game Room.” Inside there are several 1980s videogames. One, *Black Tiger*, is sucking everything toward it, including Wade. Halliday wrote in his diary that he would spend hours playing *Black Tiger* as a child as a form of escape from his “rotten existence.” Wade is sucked inside the monitor and finds himself dressed in the outfit of the hero of *Black Tiger*, carrying his weapons. He realizes that he now has to play a 3D, virtual reality version of the game.

Wade finds the game difficult at first, but after three hours he manages to get through all eight levels. Having won the game, he finds himself back in the bowling alley. One of the characters from the game also materializes in the bowling alley and offers him one of a selection of “giant robots” as a reward for having won. Wade chooses a transforming robot called *Leopardon*. Soon after, an image of the Crystal Key appears inside a glowing red star. The *Black Tiger* cabinet then transforms into a door with jade edges. Wade shouts with joy and jumps through.

The appearance of Blade Runner and the Voight-Kampff machine in particular drive home the novel’s blurring of the distinction between reality and illusion. In Blade Runner (and the Philip K. Dick novel it is based on, Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep), the line between humans and robots becomes so thin that it is almost impossible to tell the difference between them. However, the existence of the Voight-Kampff machine is a reminder that there is and always will be a difference, no matter how hard it is to detect.



Even when the hunt requires Wade to participate in combat, his extensive knowledge of Halliday’s favorite books and films gives him an enormous advantage. He knows that he is supposed to kill the Tyrell security guards and also knows exactly where to locate the Voight-Kampff machine within the building. Thus, brains help even in situations that require brawn.



The parallels between Wade and Halliday become clearer by the minute. Both of them escaped from childhood misery through playing videogames, and as a result they developed an usual level of skill and expertise. However, one major difference is the fact that Wade had Halliday as a role model. Through his idolization of Halliday, Wade was introduced to a whole range of culture that he wouldn’t otherwise know about.



Finally, Wade’s luck seems to have turned around. Although the Sixers present a severe challenge due to their enormous amount of wealth and resources, as soon as Wade is inside a game and in the zone the Sixers’ disproportionate power ceases to matter at all.



LEVEL TWO: 0027

Wade rematerializes inside Tyrell's office. He returns to the *Vonnegut* and pulls up his research notes on Halliday's favorite band, Rush. He finds Rush's sci-fi themed album *2112* and, on the album artwork, locates the same red star that he saw inside Black Tiger. One of the songs, "The Temples of Syrinx," contains the clue to the Crystal Key's location. Wade races to the planet Syrinx, a "desolate world" in Sector 21. On the planet, he finds 1,024 copies of a city called Megadon, which is mentioned in the liner notes of *2112*. Once Wade has landed the *Vonnegut*, he finds the Temple of Syrinx, and is relieved to find that he is seemingly completely alone.

Wade realizes that he is supposed to put an offering on the altar of the Temple. He tries the robot, but nothing happens. However, another clue from the *2112* liner notes leads him to a waterfall on the outskirts of Megadon, where he discovers a tunnel and cave-like chamber. Inside the chamber, a lever opens a trapdoor, which Wade jumps through. He arrives in a cube-shaped room where there is a 1974 Gibson Les Paul guitar embedded in the stone wall. Wade pulls the guitar from the wall and plays the Rush song "Discovery" on the guitar. After he finishes, another clue appears, which promises that the Crystal Gate "cannot be unlocked alone."

The guitar transforms into the Crystal Key, and Wade receives a further 25,000 points, putting him back ahead of Sorrento. Looking at the guitar, he spots the letter A, which looks exactly the same as one of the character symbols in Halliday's first *Dungeons & Dragons* characters sheet. It is the A for Anorak, and the same symbol appears on the gate to Castle Anorak, Halliday's stronghold on the D&D themed planet Chthonia. Wade returns to the *Vonnegut* and heads straight to the castle. While travelling there, Wade hears on the news that the Sixers have the entire castle surrounded.

Wade arrives on Chthonia to find that the Sixers have installed a magical shield over Castle Anorak. Gunter clans are attacking the shield with nuclear weapons, but they are having no effect. Over the next few days, gunters try everything within their power to destroy the shield, to no avail. People begin to announce that the hunt is basically over. However, Wade remains calm, reasoning that, like any videogame, the hunt has simply reached a new, more difficult level, requiring a new approach. He devises a plan, emailing Art3mis, Aech, and Shoto and telling them how to obtain the Crystal Key. He knows that he is likely to be killed in this final effort, but vows to "reach the Third Gate, or die trying."

Once again, Wade's extensive research comes in handy. He is able to recognize the star in which the image of the Crystal Key appeared simply by memory as a result of knowing Halliday's obsessions so well. At this point, it again seems as if the hunt will favor not the richest, most powerful, or most skilled avatar, but rather the one who knows Halliday and his obsessions inside out.



The clue that Wade receives about the Crystal Gate suggests a major twist to the trajectory of the Easter egg hunt thus far. Up until this point, Wade has worked alone to great success—as have Art3mis and Aech. However, this new clue appears to indicate that no one will be able to clear the Crystal Gate alone. This is somewhat ominous, considering it could provide a massive advantage to the Sixers.



Wade's brief moment of triumph is soon darkened by the swift progress of the Sixers. The fact that they have the castle surrounded does not bode well. In the past, Wade has arrived in the location of a key or gate either well before or after the Sixers have been there. He has never actually had to face them directly—until now.



Recall that each time Wade has hit rock bottom and struggled to find any hope in the situation he is in, he receives a new surge of determination and is able to make the impossible happen. This is typical of the story of the underdog, who must beat extremely unlikely odds in order to achieve success—and does so precisely because no one expects them to be able to pull it off.



LEVEL THREE: 0028

Wade is watching the 1985 movie *Explorers* when the IOI corporate police arrive at his apartment in Columbus. He sees them pull up and immediately orders Max to initiate lockdown mode of the apartment's security system. Four cops stand outside Wade's War Door, and one announces that they are here because Wade has outstanding payments on his IOI Visa card. As the record shows he is unemployed, he is being taken for mandatory indenturement. When he has repaid the debt alongside any additional fees and penalties, he will be free to go. The police will be seizing his property and selling it.

The cops begin to cut through the War Door. Wade knows he will have about five minutes before they are able to get through, and quickly swallows two anti-anxiety pills he's saved for the occasion. Inside **the OASIS** he closes his windows, checks the Scoreboard—which remains the same, with Art3mis in first place after having obtained the Crystal Key—and logs out. Wade then deletes Max and detonates an “incendiary device” that melts his entire computer. At that moment, the cops enter Wade's apartment and grab him, putting a ball gag in his mouth. They announce that they are placing Wade under “corporate arrest” and insult him for having melted his computer, which he could have sold to help pay his debt.

The cops tear off Wade's haptic suit and give him an uncomfortable gray jumpsuit and plastic shoes to wear instead. They then load him into the van next to two other arrestees, both of whom are strapped into their seats and wearing visors. A cop puts a visor on Wade and, as they drive through Columbus, Wade is forced to watch a beach at sunset. He figures the IOI police play this to keep new indents calm during the drive. Wade pushes his visor off and looks out the window, curious to see the outside for the first time since he arrived in Columbus.

LEVEL THREE: 0029

There appear to be far more homeless people lining the streets than when Wade first arrived. He watches some of them using **the OASIS** from GSS's free access stations. The van pulls up to 101 IOI Plaza in downtown Columbus. The three buildings precisely resemble the IOI headquarters Wade visited inside the OASIS. Wade is taken inside to the “IOI Indentured Employee Induction Center.” His handcuffs are removed and his retinas are scanned. He is then fed into a security line where he sees hundreds of other indents in the same grey jumpsuit and shoes. Ahead of him, he sees several people get taken aside as miniature pieces of technology are plucked from their bodies. Wade passes the checkpoints without incident.

Indenturement refers to a condition whereby a person is forced to perform labor in order to repay a debt. It is not quite the same as slavery, but there are similarities. Furthermore, claims of fictitious debt are often used by slavers in order to place and keep people in slavery. At this point it is unclear whether Wade's charge of debt is fictitious or not.



The nightmarish situation Wade suddenly finds himself in is alarming. What is more shocking, however, is the fact that Wade seems to be so prepared for it. He has saved anti-anxiety pills to take and has prepared an incendiary device to melt his computer—hardly ordinary preparations. Perhaps Wade simply knew it was likely that IOI would arrest him in order to take him out of the running—or perhaps there is something else afoot.



Wade's decision to take off his visor and look out the window for the first time since he moved to Columbus is significant. Like the OASIS itself, the beach image that IOI plays for new indents is designed to make people forget their problems through a pleasurable “escape hatch.” However, in this moment Wade doesn't want to escape into illusion, but rather confront the ugly truth of reality.



This passage makes clear that one of the most oppressive things you can do to people in the year 2045 is take away their access to the OASIS. Whereas ordinarily we might expect prisoners to be smuggling in drugs, money, or weapons, the new IOI indents simply try to smuggle in the equipment they need to log into the OASIS.



Wade is given a series of tests to determine how he can best be put to use by IOI. He intentionally fails all the questions related to Halliday and the Easter egg hunt, as he doesn't want to be placed in the Oology Division and risk encountering Sorrento. Wade is "awarded" the position of OASIS Technical Support Representative II and informed that once his debt is paid off, he may be able to gain a permanent position at IOI. However, Wade knows this is all just a show; in reality, it is not actually possible for indents to pay their debt. Added fees mean that debts *increase* rather than decrease over time, and once indentured, "you would probably remain indentured for life." To many, this is still better than a life on the streets.

Wade is forced to sign an "Indenturement Contract." He explains that this is all part of his plan. He is washed, physically inspected, vaccinated, and forced to watch a looping video entitled: "Indentured Servitude: Your Fast Track from Debt to Success!" He is then fitted with a security anklet that will paralyze him if he tries to escape or remove it. An "observation and communication tag" (OCT) is then pierced into his ear. Finally, a camera is attached to the back of his head. An HR computer speaks to him directly through his earpiece, instructing him to go to a nearby cafeteria where he is served bland food. Afterward, he is given five minutes to use the bathroom, and seven hours to sleep.

Wade's sleeping capsule is inside a "Hab Block," which reminds him of a mausoleum. The capsule is shaped like a coffin, with a camera attached to watch Wade as he sleeps. There is an entertainment console and visor attached to the wall which plays only one channel: IOI-N, the official company channel showing news and propaganda. Wade learns that he can access further entertainment options once he has achieved three consecutive positive performance reviews. The only TV show available is a company-produced show titled *Tommy Queue*, about an indentured OASIS tech rep. Wade stays awake as long as possible watching *Tommy Queue* on repeat. He torments himself by thinking about Art3mis until he falls asleep.

LEVEL THREE: 0030

Wade works in a cubicle inside the IOI's Technical Support call center. He is not permitted to access any part of **the OASIS** except his work account on the IOI intranet. He addresses the needs of customers, and when he tries to respond to their queries with "You're a complete fucking moron," the software forbids it. There is no way Wade can distract himself during his shifts: the only things he can look at are the clock and the IOI stock ticker, which cannot be removed from view. He gets three five-minute bathroom breaks per day and one half-hour lunch break. He eats lunch alone at his desk, as he hates the other indents.

It is becoming more and more obvious that Wade knows what he is doing, even if readers do not. The fact that Wade knows so much about IOI's system of indenturement indicates that he has researched it in advance and may have even gotten himself indentured on purpose. However, given that—as Wade himself points out—it is impossible to escape indenturement, it is hard to understand why Wade would have chosen to undergo this voluntarily.



Wade is now fully immersed in a nightmare corporate prison dystopia. Every aspect of his identity and ability to express himself has been stripped away; he has so little agency that he is even told by an HR computer when to go to the bathroom. Meanwhile, the intensity of the surveillance he is placed under seems impossible to escape. The more readers learn about the IOI indenturement center, the less likely it seems that Wade will be able to escape his fate.



The fact that Wade's sleeping capsule resembles a coffin and the "Hab Block" a mausoleum is no coincidence. Being indentured to IOI is a kind of living death. Although indents are kept alive through food, accommodation, health checks, and other forms of monitoring, their lives are so restricted and devoid of vibrancy that they can hardly be considered lives in any meaningful sense.



Once again, Wade's situation at IOI hardly seems conducive to rebellion or success in the Easter egg hunt. If the IOI software is so restrictive that it controls what he says while working at the help desk, how is there any hope of Wade escaping his indenturement and returning to the Easter egg hunt inside the OASIS?



Wade regularly falls asleep during his shift, to the point that **IOI** have started giving him narcolepsy pills to keep him awake. He saves them and takes them after his shift has ended, when he is back in his sleep capsule. Wade turns away the security camera and recording devices on his body and in his capsule. Every night, he taps the entertainment screen to play *Tommy Queue*; however, he is not actually watching it, and nor is he sleeping. Instead, he has been surviving on only two hours of sleep per night.

Seven months ago, Wade bought a set of **IOI** intranet passwords on the **OASIS** black market from a former IOI contract programmer. He hadn't done anything with them until the Sixers installed the force field on Castle Anorak, at which point he'd hatched a plan to purposefully get himself indentured and infiltrate the IOI database. The plan's potential to work relied on the fact that it was "clearly insane." Wade logs into the IOI intranet using the passwords, which he'd memorized prior to his arrest. He spends his nights "digging deeper and deeper" into the IOI network until he reaches the Oology Division Database.

Finally, the night comes when Wade is ready to explore the Oology database. He plans to download the data and smuggle it out with him when he escapes **IOI** headquarters. Most of the database is made up of information about Halliday, some of which Wade didn't know existed. He copies vital information about the Sixers' force field around Castle Anorak and the artifact they are using to generate it. Wade then finds the "jackpot"—recordings of the Sixers' attempts to open the Third Gate. Although the Sixers have found the Gate, they cannot figure out how to open it; simply inserting the Crystal Key does not work.

While Wade waits for the information about the Third Gate to copy to his flash drive, he finds a folder called "Threat Assessments" featuring information about himself, Art3mis, Aech, Shoto, and Daito. He sees that after he fled to Columbus they lost track of him and that his current location is listed as "unknown." Wade opens Art3mis' folder, where he sees a picture of what she looks like in real life for the first time. She looks exactly like her avatar, except for the fact that in reality, a giant birthmark covers almost half of her face. Wade thinks that she looks even more beautiful in real life than in **the OASIS**. To his horror, he realizes that **IOI** have had her house under surveillance for months.

The fact that Wade saves his narcolepsy pills and takes them after his shift ends is the first sign readers see of successful rebellion within his life in the indenturement center. Suddenly, it becomes clear that while Wade is making it seem as though he is passively giving into his life as an indent, in reality he is up to something quite different.



Here Wade's plan finally comes to light. He has purposefully gotten himself indentured in order to utilize the IOI passwords he bought on the black market and hack into IOI's database from the inside. Once again, Wade's nerdiness and underdog status allow him to get a massive advantage. Furthermore, the fact that he is courageous enough to pull off a plan that is "clearly insane" comes from an absolute desperation to win.



Up until this point, Wade thought that he knew pretty much everything there was to know about Halliday. However, this passage serves as a reminder that no matter how much effort Wade put in personally, it is difficult to compete with the resources possessed by IOI. On the other hand, Wade is currently demonstrating qualities that the IOI can never hope to possess: moral principles, selflessness, and bravery.



This is a moment at which the gulf between illusion and reality suddenly becomes smaller. Wade realizes that Art3mis looks just like her avatar, implying that—contrary to her claims—Wade perhaps does know the "real" Art3mis after all. On a darker note, IOI also know the "real" Art3mis, and have been spying on her for months. The implication of this is that her life, as well as the lives of Wade, Aech, and Shoto, are in immediate danger.



Both Shoto and Daito don't look anything like their avatars. There is no photo and little information in Aech's file, and Wade can tell that the name listed is fake. Daito's file, meanwhile, contains a video of Daito being thrown to his death. Wade copies the information from all five files and then opens another folder called "Mission Status." He reads a memo instructing Sixers to kidnap Art3mis and Shoto, force them to help the Sixers open the final gate, and then kill them. The memo was sent only five hours ago. Before his arrest Wade had arranged a timed transfer into his IOI credit account that would clear his debt; however, that transfer isn't coming for another five days, and that will be too late. He must escape as soon as possible.

LEVEL THREE: 0031

Wade sends a request to the Oology Division for a "very specific item" to be delivered in two days' time. He disables his security anklet and earpiece, then logs out of the IOI intranet. He retrieves a vacuum-packed IOI maintenance-tech uniform and puts it on. Telling his earpiece that he needs to use the bathroom, he enters an elevator and requests the lobby. As he is going down, he thinks about Sorrento and the other Sixers watching scrutinizing the security camera footage in the wake of his escape. He looks directly at the security camera, smiles, and gives the finger.

Wade exits the lobby tensely, hoping that no one will notice he is still wearing the indents' plastic slippers. A woman touches his shoulder and points out that his ear is bleeding profusely. He thanks her and keeps walking outside. Outside in the fresh air, Wade drops his security anklet in the trash. Before his arrest, Wade rented a mailbox at an outlet four blocks away from IOI Plaza and had an OASIS rig shipped to it. He logs into the OASIS for the first time in eight days—a personal record.

Art3mis, Aech, and Shoto have all written to ask Wade where he is. Wade replies to Art3mis first, warning her about the Sixers' plan to abduct her. He tells her to leave for a safe place immediately, adding that he thinks she is "even more beautiful in real life." He sends similar emails to Aech and Shoto. Soon after, he sees that IOI have already reported Bryce Lynch as a missing indent. Wade erases everything to do with the Bryce Lynch identity and puts his own fingerprints and retinal scans back on his citizen profile. He hails an autocab and is relieved when his thumbprint brings up the identity Wade Watts instead of Bryce Lynch.

While Wade's plan may have been ingenious, he didn't account for the turn of events that have now presented themselves. Of all the top gunters, only Aech has successfully concealed his location and identity from IOI—all the others are known to the Sixers and thus could be killed at any minute. Wade no longer has any time to waste living his secret double life as an indent. He must escape immediately.



Wade's behavior in this passage is remarkable considering that up until recently, he spent most of his time inside the OASIS and thus all his adventures and rebellions were confined to the virtual realm. Wade's ability to escape IOI headquarters suggests that the skills he gained in the OASIS can be transferred to physical reality.



This is a triumphant moment for Wade. It is the longest time he has ever spent outside the OASIS, and in this period he has proven that he is ingenious, courageous, and quick on his feet. However, it remains to be seen whether this ingenuity will translate into success when he returns to the OASIS to complete the hunt.



On top of his other skills, Wade also appears to have gained a new charisma in the way he communicates with Art3mis. Perhaps now that he has the confidence of someone who can pull off major rebellions in real life as well as in the OASIS, he is more certain of his ability to woo Art3mis and regain her respect.



The autocab pulls up to a clothing store called Thr3ads. Wade purchases clothing that are wired for connection to **the OASIS**, along with outerwear, as he is freezing. Afterward, he purchases a flak jacket, a gun, bullets, and a can of mace. It is the first time Wade has ever touched a real gun. Finally, Wade heads to an OASIS parlor called the Plug, which he chooses because it is not owned by **IOI**. He asks to hire a deluxe rig for 12 hours. The cashier warns him that if he leaves vomit, urine, or semen in the bay he won't get his deposit back. Wade enters the bay and inserts the data drive into the computer slot. He awakens Max and tells him they have "a lot of work to do."

Wade emails every major news channel with evidence of how **IOI** killed Daito and attempted to kill Wade. He also attaches the memo ordering the abduction of Art3mis and Shoto, and a text transcription of his conversation with Sorrento, although he blacks out his own name. He then drafts an email to every **OASIS** user, but doesn't send it yet. Finally, he logs into the Basement, where Aech, Art3mis, and Shoto are waiting.

LEVEL THREE: 0032

Wade checks that Shoto and Art3mis have left their homes for safe locations, and they both confirm that they have. Wade explains that he assumed a fake identity, purposefully got himself indentured, and hacked into the **IOI** database. Aech and Shoto express their admiration, but Art3mis remains skeptical, telling Wade it was a "stupid" risk to take. She is also angry that he looked in her file, telling him that he should be more respectful of other people's privacy. However, after Wade reveals all the extra information on Halliday he downloaded from the IOI database, Art3mis softens and tells him she owes him.

Wade shares the good news that the Sixers still don't know how to open the Third Gate. He explains this gate is more complicated than the first two, and shows the video of Sorrento trying and failing to open it. Three words are carved into the Third Gate: "Charity. Hope. Faith." Sorrento tries reciting them in different languages, to no avail. Suddenly, Wade, Art3mis, Aech, and Shoto exclaim in unison that the words are taken from "Three Is a Magic Number," the pilot episode of 1970s TV show *Schoolhouse Rock*. Wade thinks that three keys must be used in order to open the Third Gate. He suggests that Halliday wanted to force people to work together, although Art3mis proposes it is more likely that he wanted to ensure a dramatic, competitive finale.

The Plug may not be the ideal location for Wade to reenter the OASIS, but luckily—as the book has shown us so far—people's real-life surroundings hardly matter once they are inside the simulation. Furthermore, it is arguably safer now for Wade to be in an anonymous booth at a public OASIS access point than in his apartment, given how desperate the Sixers will be to hunt him down and kill him.



Whereas before it was imperative that Wade maintained his privacy, at this point he chooses to leverage his fame and influence in order to bring IOI and Sorrento to justice. At the same time, Wade is still careful to keep his own identity secret—understandable given the kind of scrutiny he will soon be under.



Art3mis' cold reaction to Wade's news is perhaps unsurprising given that historically Wade has failed to respect her boundaries. Although she and Wade developed an extremely close friendship and romantic relationship, Art3mis doesn't feel she can trust him. On the other hand, with so many enemies around, she may not have much of a choice.



Wade, Art3mis, Aech, and Shoto are no longer so concerned with whether or not they should form an alliance. Instead, an alliance has naturally developed between them due to the frightening power of their mutual enemy. Rather than focusing on their own individual chance of winning the egg, their main goal now is to stop IOI from accessing it. As a result, this brings them together and compels them to act as a team. Is this what Halliday wanted all along?



Wade explains that the shield the Sixers have installed will dissolve on its own in 36 hours' time, noting: "I've taken care of it." He adds that they will need a lot of backup, which is why he's written an email to every gunter, which he plans to send later that night. The email warns that if the gunters don't join forces, "the OASIS will fall under IOI's imperialist rule." Art3mis is uncertain that the gunters will show up, but Aech is confident that they will. Wade adds that most of the gunter clans have already given up on the Easter egg hunt, so they have "nothing to lose."

The team agrees to go ahead with a plan, but Art3mis points out that, in reality, she is currently in Vancouver airport with nowhere to go. Shoto chimes in, saying that he's at a public café in Osaka where he likely won't be safe from the Sixers for long. Wade admits that he's homeless, too. Suddenly a deep voice offers help—it is Og, Morrow's avatar, who has suddenly materialized inside the Basement. He asks if any of them have been to Oregon, saying it is "lovely this time of year."

LEVEL THREE: 0033

Wade, Art3mis, Aech, and Shoto stare at Morrow in shock. Aech asks how he got there, and Morrow admits that he's been spying on them using the special powers that only his avatar possesses. He assures them that he is the only avatar with access to private chatrooms, and adds that he was eavesdropping because he wanted to help them. He won't give them any clues, but promised Halliday that he would protect the "integrity" of the contest, which is what he is doing now. Wade asks about Morrow's falling out with Halliday, and Morrow replies that they didn't speak for ten years, until a few weeks before Halliday's death. Halliday asked Morrow to watch over the contest, and although Morrow was reluctant, he agreed.

Morrow tells the crew that he wants to offer them his home in Oregon as a "sanctuary" where they will be safe from the Sixers. He tells Shoto that he has already arranged for a private jet to fly him from Osaka, and has done the same for Art3mis. Morrow knows that Aech is in Pittsburgh, and asks him to pick up Wade in Columbus, where a jet will be waiting to take both of them to Oregon. The team thank Morrow, who disappears. Shoto and Art3mis log out, at which point Aech warns Wade that he doesn't look anything like his avatar and that meeting in real life might come as a shock. Wade is nervous about the prospect of encountering both Aech and Art3mis in real life.

Wade and his friends' willingness to form an alliance against IOI should extend to the wider gunter community—or, at least, Wade hopes so. Aech's confidence that the gunters will support them speaks to Aech's own selflessness and generosity. Art3mis, on the other hand, is more of a loner and thus more skeptical about Wade's plan working out.



Although they may be the most famous and respected gunters in the OASIS, in reality Art3mis, Shoto, Wade, and Aech are young people without money or homes who are being persecuted by an evil corporation. Indeed, at this point they need a real-life intervention from a hero—luckily, Morrow steps into this role just in time.



Given the amount of attention, controversy, and drama that the hunt has generated, it is little wonder that Morrow has kept his distance and tried not to directly intervene in it. On the other hand, he is clearly loyal enough to Halliday to want to ensure that the Sixers don't get away with manipulating the competition to their advantage. Rather than supporting an individual user, Morrow supports the rights of gunters to pursue the hunt on its own terms, rather than gaming the system through unjust means.



Both Aech and Wade are anxious to meet each other. Although readers do not yet know why this is the case for Aech, Wade's nervousness is surely rooted in the fact that Aech is his best friend and "only" friend, so the stakes are extremely high. If Aech and Wade do not get along in real life, this will seriously undermine Wade's theory that the OASIS is a true representation of people's personalities and that it is possible to truly get to know someone through it.



Wade sends his “Call to Arms” email, also posting it to the gunter message boards. Immediately the news channels begin reporting that the gunters have “declared all-out war on the Sixers.” Wade spends a few hours preparing his avatar for battle, then falls asleep in the Plug’s rig, clutching his gun. He wakes up to the sound of Aech calling him. He returns his rented gear and goes outside, seeing Aech’s RV on the street. He enters the RV to find a heavy, short-haired African American girl sitting in the driver’s seat, wearing a vintage *Rush 2112* concert t-shirt. She turns around and Wade can tell immediately from her smile that she is Aech.

Despite her smile, Aech seems nervous. Wade cannot help but start laughing, which quickly makes Aech laugh too. When she speaks, her voice is higher than it is in **the OASIS**. Aech asks if Wade is shocked that she is actually a “fat black chick.” Wade replies that it doesn’t matter, Aech is still his best friend. The two of them drive to the private hangar where Morrow’s private jet is waiting. It is the first time either Wade or Aech have flown in a plane, and for a while they are stunned into silence by the view. However, eventually Wade asks Aech to tell her story.

Aech’s real name is Helen Harris. Her father died in Afghanistan, and she was raised in Atlanta by a single mother, Marie, who worked in an online data-processing center. Marie used a white male avatar in **the OASIS** because it made other people treat her better. Aech did the same, and Marie helped her lie on her public school record, allowing her to assume a white male identity. On Aech’s 18th birthday, she came out to her mother as gay and admitted that she’d been dating a girl she met in the OASIS for a year. Marie was furious and kicked Aech out of her house. Aech was homeless for a while, and started competing in the OASIS arena leagues in order to earn credits. She saved up enough to buy an RV and has remained on the move ever since.

As Aech and Wade talk, Wade realizes that nothing in their friendship has really changed; they are as close as ever. Landing in Oregon, both of them are stunned by Morrow’s mansion. Aech compares it to Rivendell, the beautiful Elven town in the *Lord of the Rings* movies. Morrow greets them warmly and tells them it’s nice to have visitors, as apart from his household help, he has been alone since Kira’s death. He tells them that Art3mis and Shoto have already arrived, but that Art3mis said it would be too distracting for them all to meet before the battle and suggested they wait until after. Wade feels both relieved and disappointed.

Even though Aech looks nothing like her avatar, there are clues that immediately indicate that they are one and the same person. The fact that Wade can tell from her smile that it really is Aech shows that their connection is formed of something far deeper than superficial matters. Wade knows Aech’s personality so well that he is immediately able to recognize her inside a body that he never imagined would be hers.



Here readers are reminded of the combination of advancement and deprivation that characterize life in 2045. Aech and Wade may have access to certain advanced forms of technology, but due to their poverty and the energy crisis, they have never been inside a plane. Again, the contrast between their lives inside and outside the OASIS is extreme.



Although Marie understood what it was like to be discriminated against based on her race and gender, this did not enable her to feel empathy when it came to her daughter’s sexual orientation. Indeed, Marie’s eagerness to embrace the opportunity to live as a white man inside the OASIS suggests that she was less focused on eradicating prejudice than she was on getting ahead personally. This quality is not reflected in her daughter, who has proven to be selfless and generous throughout the novel.



At this late stage in the novel, readers get a glimpse of another utopia: Morrow’s mansion. Wade’s comparison of the house to Rivendell (which is also a utopia) demonstrates that he perceives the house as an oasis of beauty, peace, and security. Of course, there will prove to be a great contrast between this haven and the chaos that will come in the final struggle to secure Halliday’s egg inside the OASIS.



Morrow leads them through the mansion's grand entrance. As they walk, Wade nervously confesses his love of Halcydonia Interactive. Aech laughs at Wade's enthusiasm, but Morrow accepts the compliment graciously. He promises to give Aech and Wade a full tour of the mansion later, but for now he sets them up in state-of-the-art **OASIS** immersion bays. Wade and Aech wish each other good luck before disappearing into the bays. Morrow tells Wade: "The whole world is rooting for the four of you. Try not to let them down."

Before Morrow leaves, Wade asks him what happened to his friendship with Halliday. Morrow explains that Halliday had been in love with Kira since high school, but he was never brave enough to tell her how he felt. He only confessed his feelings to Morrow just before his death. It was painful for Halliday to watch his best friend marry Kira, the only woman he would ever love. Morrow wishes Wade luck once more, and Wade asks what he will do during the fight. Morrow smiles and says that he is planning to watch, and that it looks like it will be "the most epic battle in videogame history." Wade steps into the bay, dons the immersion gear, and logs in.

LEVEL THREE: 0034

Wade takes out the Leopardon robot he won in Black Tiger. He shouts its name and the robot instantly grows from 12 inches to 100 meters high. Wade enters it and takes a seat in the captain's chair; he also puts on a bracelet that will allow him to control Leopardon from the outside. He orders the robot to transform into the starship *Marveller*, and he sets off for the Chthonia. It looks like every **OASIS** user is headed to Castle Anorak at the same time, and Wade wonders how many of them are there to fight and how many plan to just sit back and watch. Landing on Chthonia, he is shocked by the swarms of avatars standing there. At the entrance of the castle stand Aech, Art3mis, and Shoto, each inside their respective robots.

As Wade swoops in, the crowds chant his avatar's name. Shoto points out that if the shield doesn't come down it will be "pretty embarrassing," but Wade assures him that there are still six minutes left and that it will come down. At that moment, Sorrento emerges from Castle Anorak, smiling and surrounded by ten other Sixers. He welcomes them to the castle, his voice booming through a speaker, and insists that they will not be able to get through the shield. The gunters shout and hiss back at him, and Wade says that he's wrong: they're coming in.

Although they have not known each other long, Morrow has quickly become a kind of father figure to Wade. This is emphasized by Wade's confession about Halcydonia Interactive, which is a software company that makes educational games for children. Morrow may not have been directly present in Wade's childhood, but he played an indirect role in raising and educating him.



Wade has spent his life idolizing Halliday, but in this passage it becomes clear that Halliday's life was far from perfect, and that he may well have died with serious regrets. Although Halliday achieved much in the world of video gaming and collecting, he never confessed his true feelings to the woman he loved and he drove his best friend away in the process. He may be a hero to Wade, but his life was also deeply tragic.



The final battle is set to be epic, but Wade is still uncertain if the gunters have any chance of winning. He knows that he and his friends are prepared to risk everything in order to beat the Sixers and save the OASIS, but it is hard to know if they can trust the other gunters, or whether these avatars have just come along for the ride.



Sorrento is a rather typical evil villain. He is boastful, smug, and cares about nothing except himself and his own power. Of course, this makes it even more imperative that Wade and the gunters beat Sorrento and prevent him from taking over the OASIS. While the Sixers' position seems secure for the moment, Sorrento may pay a heavy price for underestimating his opponents.



Sorrento puts a small item in front of him, which instantly transforms into Mechagodzilla, a robot twice the size of the others that is “nearly indestructible.” The ten Sixers then activate their robots in unison. Some gunters turn and flee, but many stay and hold their ground.

The Sixers have built an armored bunker filled with weapons and Supply Droids behind Castle Anorak. At 11.59am, one of the Supply Droids, SD-93, frees itself from its charging dock and transmits an equipment requisition order to two robotic sentries at the entrance of the bunker. The sentries allow the droid to approach the weapons stockpile and retrieve an antimatter friction-induction bomb from the inventory. The droid then rolls up to the very top of Castle Anorak, easily passing security checkpoints. On the roof of the castle a Sixer wizard sits holding the artifact that generates the shield. SD-03 detonates the antimatter friction-induction bomb, vaporizing itself and the Sixer wizard, leaving the artifact to deactivate and drop to the floor.

LEVEL THREE: 0035

The shield dissolves and there is suddenly nothing separating the Sixer army from the gunters. Wade is stunned to find that every single gunter around him rushes toward the Sixers, even though many of them are headed straight toward “certain death.” Sorrento receives the vast majority of gunter fire, but his robot remains undamaged. Aech, Shoto, Art3mis, and Wade all direct their blasts at Sorrento, and Art3mis’ beam weapon disables one of the robot’s cannons. In return, Mechagodzilla blasts blue lightning at them. The team escapes, but Wade points out that they probably don’t have a chance of destroying Mechagodzilla. Wade suggests he distract the robot while the others head for the castle; Shoto agrees but quickly takes on the job of distracting Sorrento himself.

Aech and Art3mis abandon their robots and head for the castle. Shoto attacks Mechagodzilla, slicing off its right arm, but the robot retaliates by destroying Shoto’s robot in a ball of fire. Shoto’s name disappears from the Scoreboard, confirming that his avatar is dead. While Wade is distracted, Sorrento takes the opportunity to cut his robot in half. Luckily Wade ejects himself from the robot just in time. He is almost crushed by Mechagodzilla’s foot, but—in a fury of rage at Sorrento—activates the Beta Capsule, thereby turning himself into Ultraman.

Throughout the novel, the Sixers have dramatically outmatched the gunters. However, this does not mean they are impossible to take down.



Wade has employed the same tactic here as he did in order to download the information from the IOI database: he is taking the Sixers down from the inside. While the Sixers may put up a powerful show of might, their vulnerability comes from within their own system. IOI only has power because all of its components slavishly work together toward one goal. As soon as an individual breaks rank, they are in serious trouble.



As a gigantic monster that seemingly can’t be damaged or destroyed, Mechagodzilla becomes a metaphor for IOI itself. However, note that it only appears as though Mechagodzilla is an unbeatable opponent. In reality, there is arguably no such thing, and—as Wade’s plan of distracting the robot indicates—perhaps only a change of tactic is needed.



For both Shoto and Wade, the desire for revenge serves as a powerful motivating force that allows them to do serious damage to the Sixers. While the Sixers have an intimidating amount of power, the passion of Shoto and Wade’s thirst for revenge is perhaps more powerful still.



Using white beams, Wade knocks Mechagodzilla to the ground, to the cheers of surrounding gunters. As Sorrento struggles to get the robot upright again, Wade slices the robot in half using a blade of energy. Sorrento attempts to escape inside the robot's head, but Wade blasts it, killing Sorrento's avatar in the process. Wade returns to normal and goes to meet Aech and Art3mis at the castle. They take out their keys and, after Wade declares "three is a magic number," two additional keyholes appear. The trio insert their keys and turn them in unison. The field of stars opens up in front of them once again. Just as they are about to jump in, there is a massive explosion. The chapter ends with Wade saying: "And then we all died."

This passage begins on a triumphant note, with Wade killing Sorrento. This sense of triumph continues when it turns out that Wade was right—for one reason or another, Halliday did want to force competitors to come together and unlock the Third Gate as a trio. However, this brief moment of triumph and hope disappears immediately when, out of nowhere, Wade explains that everyone dies.



LEVEL THREE: 0036

When a user's avatar dies, the perspective switches to third person and replays the moments leading up to the avatar's death. Wade watches as a white light obliterates the whole surface of the planet except the Third Gate, and realizes that the Sixers detonated an artifact called the Cataclyst, thereby killing every avatar present and destroying Castle Anorak.

The Sixers played dirty throughout the hunt, so it should perhaps come as little surprise that they would rather obliterate an entire planet than see the gunters successfully reach the egg.



Wade is expecting to see the words "Game Over" when instead another message appears on screen, saying: "Congratulations! You have an extra life!". His avatar rematerializes inside the crater where the castle once stood. He has lost his entire inventory except the quarter he won by playing a perfect game of Pac-Man. He now realizes that the quarter gave him an extra life, the first time this has happened in **OASIS** history. Suddenly, Wade hears Aech's voice, along with that of Morrow, Shoto, and Art3mis. They explain that the Sixers killed every avatar at the battle, including their own army. However, there are still 20 Sixers on the Scoreboard, who must have been waiting at a safe distance away from Chthonia.

When Wade landed on Archaide, he concluded that the planet was a "dead end" only to realize that he could win an egg (though not the egg) through playing Pac-Man. The fact that this accidental detour has now changed the course of Halliday's hunt—and thus of history—again emphasizes that failures may turn out to be successes in the long run. It also demonstrates that certain experiences can have value even if that value is unclear at the time.



Aech, Shoto, and Art3mis all wish Wade well. Artifacts cannot be destroyed by a Cataclyst blast, so Wade is able to find the artifacts his friends were carrying. He tells his friends that if he obtains the egg, he will split the prize money evenly between the four of them. He explains that he will split the money regardless, but that he would also love to have their help.

This passage demonstrates Wade's increased maturity at this point in the hunt. Whereas before he had a rather self-centered view of life brought on by his intense isolation, by now he understands that his relationships with others are what gives his life meaning.



LEVEL THREE: 0037

Wade is standing in totally dark, empty space, when suddenly he sees a coin-operated arcade game appear before him: the 1980 game *Tempest*. Wade admits that it's not his "best game," and Art3mis chastises him for not realizing that *Tempest* would feature in the Third Gate, considering that a quote from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* appears on the last page of *Anorak's Almanac*. There is only one name on *Tempest*'s high score: JDH, the initials of James Donovan Halliday. Wade realizes with dread that he will only have one chance to beat Halliday's high score.

As Wade is freaking out, Art3mis tells him not to panic. The game was made in 1980 and features a bug which means if a player dies with a certain score, they get free credits. Art3mis takes out her notes and tells Wade exactly how to exploit this bug. Wade follows her instructions and he is awarded 40 free credits. He triumphantly declares that Art3mis is "a genius." The game continues to go well, but then Art3mis informs Wade that a bunch of other Sixers have managed to get through the Third Gate and are now playing *Tempest* too. She reveals that every OASIS user is able to see them as well as Wade himself, something she previously didn't mention in order to prevent him from becoming too nervous.

Although he is nervous, Wade's inner competitiveness gives him a powerful edge. On Level 81, he hears Shoto shout: "You did it, man!" Wade exits the game and sees a message appear that tells him to "prepare for stage 2." Wade materializes on a hillside with a castle in the distance, and quickly realizes he is inside the 1975 film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. It is another Flicksync, and Wade feels confident, as he has watched the film 157 times and knows it by heart. Although he has to switch to a different character in each scene, he barely makes any mistakes. The only tricky part is not laughing at the jokes.

Aech warns Wade that three Sixers are now inside the *Holy Grail* Flicksync too. Wade completes the film, and is greeted with the message that he has "reached the end," followed by the words: "Ready Player 1." He materializes inside a giant oak-paneled room filled with computers and videogame systems arranged museum-style. He realizes it is a replica of Halliday's office. He looks around, concluding that the computers are in an egg shape and that the egg is surely hidden somewhere in this room.

*It should come as no surprise that one of the very last challenges in the hunt is also one of the most difficult. Whereas Wade has been confident about all the games he has previously had to play, *Tempest* is an exception. Furthermore, the fact that he has to beat Halliday's high score is significant. As a symbolic protégé to Halliday, Wade must prove that he is worthy of filling the shoes of his idol.*



The stakes of this part of the hunt are made dramatically clear when Art3mis reveals that every OASIS user is watching Wade's movements. This serves as a reminder that Wade's actions in this moment do not only affect himself, his friends, and the Sixers. Rather, they will dramatically alter the lives of every OASIS user and, by extension, the whole of humanity.



Wade quickly goes from being dropped into one of the most difficult challenges of the hunt to breezing through the next one. Like any individual, Wade is not good at everything; his skills work better in some contexts than others. Unfortunately, he has to compete with the Sixers, who strategically distribute all the different skills and expertise they need across their team while ensuring that the entire team is working as one.



Wade's appearance inside Halliday's office shows that he is on the brink of taking over Halliday's role as ruler of the OASIS. The arrangement of the monitors and consoles into an egg shape demonstrates that Halliday is making no secret of the fact that the egg is hidden in this room—however, this does not necessarily mean it will be easy to access.



LEVEL THREE: 0038

Wade can no longer hear the voices of his friends; the communication system has obviously been cut off. Wade tries turning on some of the computers in the room, and eventually succeeds in powering up the same one Matthew Broderick's character uses in *WarGames*. The computer asks for a login, and Wade remembers that the password for the supercomputer in the movie is the name of one of the character's sons, "the person he'd loved most in the world." Wade tries "Ogden" and "Kira," but these do not work.

After ten minutes of failures, Wade remembers a detail from Morrow's biography, which stated that Halliday would only address Kira by the name of her D&D character, Leucosia. Wade types in "Leucosia" and every system in the room suddenly turns on at once. Wade retrieves a cartridge for the videogame *Adventure* and inserts it into the corresponding computer. In the game, he rushes straight to "the Secret Room," in which he finds an egg. "The egg." Wade picks up the egg, and immediately finds himself into a crystal portal leading back to Castle Anorak.

Wade walks up to Anorak's study. He looks out the window and sees that the Cataclyst's devastation has been erased, and all of Chthonia has been restored. Inside the study, he finds a gold chalice and places the egg inside it. A fanfare of trumpets plays, and Wade suddenly sees Anorak in front of him, congratulating him on winning the game. The two shake hands, and lightning erupts all around them. Anorak transforms out of his wizard robes and into an ordinary-looking version of Halliday. Wade, meanwhile, has suddenly acquired a seemingly infinite list of special skills, powers, and magical items. He is now at level infinite, and his credit readout shows he is a multibillionaire.

Halliday tells Wade that his avatar is immortal and all-powerful, and that he is in charge of **the OASIS**. He asks that Wade use his "powers only for good." Castle Anorak also belongs to Wade, along with a red button that will delete the entirety of the OASIS forever. Before leaving, Halliday tells Wade that as "terrifying and painful" as the real world is, it is the only place where it is possible to be truly happy. He advises him not to hide inside the OASIS forever. Finally, Halliday wishes Wade luck and thanks him for playing his game. He then disappears.

This final stage of the hunt requires a different kind of knowledge about Halliday—one that could not be gained by reading biographies or Anorak's Almanac. Rather, Wade must thoughtfully consider who Halliday loved most—a difficult task considering that he never actually knew the man.



The fact that Wade learns the password to Halliday's computer through Morrow's biography indicates that sometimes it is the people around us who know us better than ourselves. Even the most isolated people are not islands, and the key to understanding them is often found in those who love them.



Halliday's transformation out of Anorak's robes and into his normal outfit is symbolic, particularly given that it occurs at the same moment as Wade accrues a mass of new wealth and powers. Halliday is ritually transferring everything he possesses to Wade, entrusting him with his fortune, abilities, and responsibilities as ruler of the OASIS.



The fact that the red button exists suggests that, as much as Halliday loved the OASIS, he suspected that it might not always be a force for good in the world. It is possible that a twist of fate could turn the OASIS into a negative, destructive thing, in which case it would be better that the simulation didn't exist at all.



After Halliday leaves, Wade is able to talk to his friends again. They congratulate him, and Wade thanks them for their help. Aech tells Wade to check the Scoreboard, which now reads: “Parzival Wins!” Aech says that after the Scoreboard showed Wade’s win, the remaining Sixers’ vidfeeds disappeared. Wade realizes he can now instantly teleport anywhere in the **OASIS** for free, and transports himself to the entrance to Castle Anorak. The remaining Sixers are standing there, having been ejected from the final stage of the hunt. Wade kills them all.

Wade then resurrects the avatars of Aech, Art3mis, and Shoto. Aech and Shoto eagerly log back into the OASIS, but Aech notes that Art3mis wanted to get some fresh air first and said she’d be outside waiting for Wade. Before Wade logs out, Aech shows him news clips of Sorrento being arrested by federal authorities on the charge of murder. The news channels have been playing clips of Aunt Alice’s trailer being blown up all day. Wade sighs, pointing out that **IOI** will hire “the best lawyers in the world.” Aech points out that Wade can now afford to do the same.

LEVEL THREE: 0039

Wade exits the immersion bay and finds Morrow waiting for him. Morrow congratulates him, hugging him tightly. He explains that GSS’s lawyers are waiting to talk to him whenever he is ready. Morrow points Wade in the direction of Art3mis, telling him that she is inside a labyrinth but that it would be easy for him to find his way through. Wade quickly realizes that the labyrinth is based on the one in Adventure, and soon after finds Art3mis, sitting on a stone bench. Wade sits next to her, and tells her that she looks just like he always imagined: “Beautiful.” Art3mis introduces herself with her real name, Samantha, and Wade does the same.

Art3mis asks what they’re going to do now, and Wade says they are going to solve world hunger and “make the world a better place.” He tells her that he is in love with her again, and she apologizes for disappearing after he first confessed to her. Wade tells her that they can take everything very slowly, and she assures him that she wants to be with him, because he is her “best friend” and “favorite person.” She kisses him, and for the first time he can remember, Wade does not want to be inside **the OASIS**.

The book concludes with a happy ending. The underdog triumphs over the evil corporate overlords, and—in a larger sense—good triumphs over evil. The fact that Wade kills the remaining Sixers quickly indicates that he takes no pleasure in seeking revenge on them. He is simply carrying out his duty as the new ruler of the OASIS.



The conclusion continues on a triumphant note, with the implication that justice will be served to Sorrento and IOI. It is true that IOI remain wealthy and powerful, and nothing is guaranteed. However, as Aech points out, the gunters no longer have to fight from a massive disadvantage. They will be able to use the OASIS’ vast resources in order to do good in the world.



It is significant that the book ends not inside the OASIS, but with Wade going outside, into the fresh air. This symbolizes his willingness to embrace the scary and painful aspects of the real world. Of course, such a gesture is necessary to building a real relationship with Art3mis/Samantha. The fact that she is willing to tell him her real name indicates that she, too, is confronting the vulnerability that comes with embracing reality.



Having won the hunt, Wade has little interest in personal glory. He wants to share the prize money equally among his friends, use it to help others, and work as a team with Art3mis. This demonstrates how much Wade has grown over the course of the novel, proving that he truly is “worthy” of inheriting Halliday’s fortune and ruling the OASIS.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Seresin, Indiana. "Ready Player One." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 30 Apr 2018. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Seresin, Indiana. "Ready Player One." LitCharts LLC, April 30, 2018. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/ready-player-one>.

To cite any of the quotes from *Ready Player One* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Cline, Ernest. *Ready Player One*. Random House. 2011.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Cline, Ernest. *Ready Player One*. New York: Random House. 2011.