

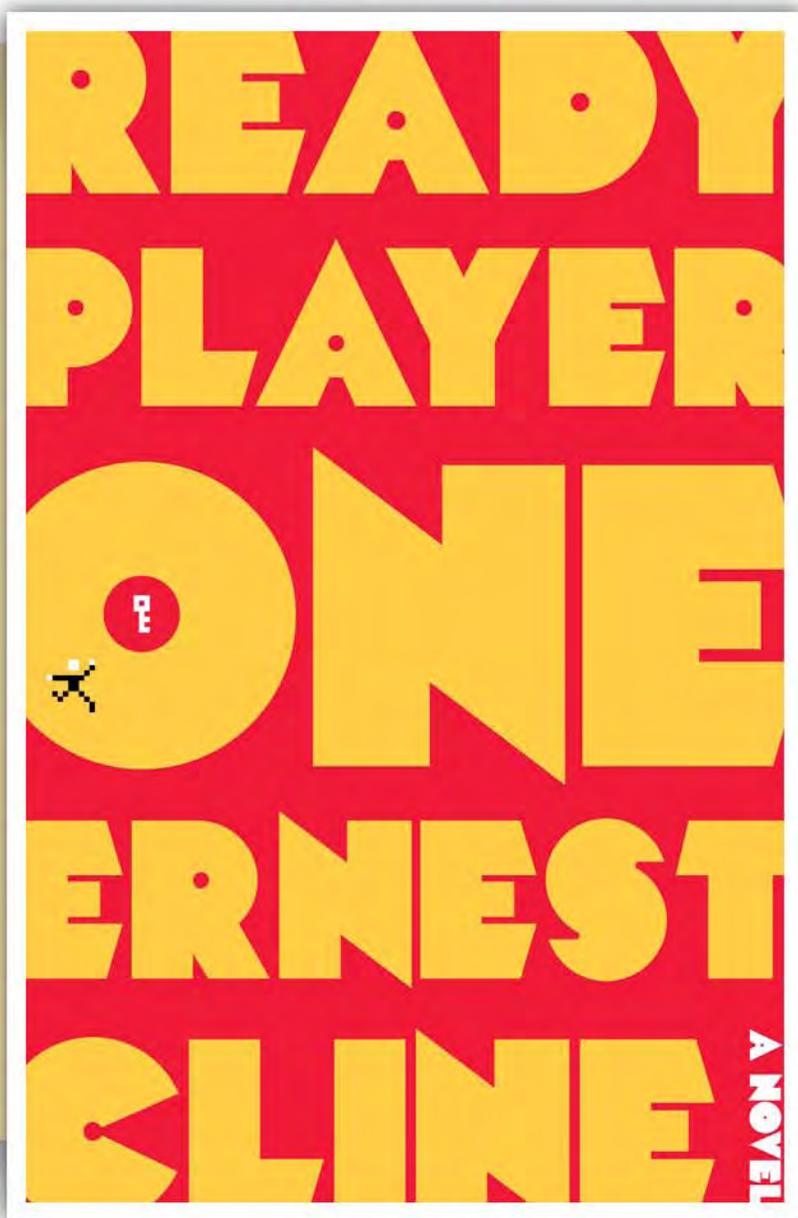
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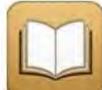


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Everyone my age remembers where they were and what they were doing when they first heard about the contest. I was sitting in my hideout watching cartoons when the news bulletin broke in on my video feed, announcing that James Halliday had died during the night.

I'd heard of Halliday, of course. Everyone had. He was the videogame designer responsible for creating the OASIS, a massively multiplayer online game that had gradually evolved into the globally networked virtual reality most of humanity now used on a daily basis. The unprecedented success of the OASIS had made Halliday one of the wealthiest people in the world.

At first, I couldn't understand why the media was making such a big deal of the billionaire's death. After all, the people of Planet Earth had other concerns. The ongoing energy crisis. Catastrophic climate change. Widespread famine, poverty, and disease. Half a dozen wars. You know: "dogs and cats living together . . . mass hysteria!" Normally, the newsfeeds didn't interrupt everyone's interactive sitcoms and soap operas unless something really major had happened. Like the outbreak of some new killer virus, or another major city vanishing in a mushroom cloud. Big stuff like that. As famous as he was, Halliday's death should have warranted only a brief segment on the evening news, so the unwashed masses could shake their heads in envy when the newscasters announced the obscenely large amount of money that would be doled out to the rich man's heirs.

But that was the rub. James Halliday had no heirs.

He had died a sixty-seven-year-old bachelor, with no living relatives and, by most accounts, without a single friend. He'd spent the last fifteen years of his life in self-imposed isolation, during which time—if the rumors were to be believed—he'd gone completely insane.

So the real jaw-dropping news that January morning, the news that had everyone from Toronto to Tokyo crapping in their cornflakes, concerned the contents of Halliday's last will and testament, and the fate of his vast fortune.

Halliday had prepared a short video message, along with instructions that it be released to the world media at the time of his death. He'd also arranged to have a copy of the video e-mailed to every single OASIS user that same morning. I still remember hearing the familiar electronic chime when it arrived in my inbox, just a few seconds after I saw that first news bulletin.

His video message was actually a meticulously constructed short film titled *Anorak's Invitation*. A famous eccentric, Halliday had harbored a lifelong obsession with the 1980s, the decade during which he'd been a teenager, and *Anorak's Invitation* was crammed with obscure '80s pop culture references, nearly all of which were lost on me the first time I viewed it.

The entire video was just over five minutes in length, and in the days and weeks that followed, it would become the most scrutinized piece of film in history, surpassing even the Zapruder film in the amount of painstaking frame-by-frame analysis devoted to it. My entire generation would come to know every second of Halliday's message by heart.



Anorak's Invitation begins with the sound of trumpets, the opening of an old song called “Dead Man's Party.”

The song plays over a dark screen for the first few seconds, until the trumpets are joined by a guitar, and that's when Halliday appears. But he's not a sixty-seven-year-old man, ravaged by time and illness. He looks just as he did on the cover of *Time* magazine back in 2014, a tall, thin, healthy man in his early forties, with unkempt hair and his trademark horn-rimmed eyeglasses. He's also wearing the same clothing he wore in the *Time* cover photo: faded jeans and a vintage Space Invaders T-shirt.

Halliday is at a high-school dance being held in a large gymnasium. He's

surrounded by teenagers whose clothing, hairstyles, and dance moves all indicate that the time period is the late 1980s.* Halliday is dancing, too—something no one ever saw him do in real life. Grinning maniacally, he spins in rapid circles, swinging his arms and head in time with the song, flawlessly cycling through several signature '80s dance moves. But Halliday has no dance partner. He is, as the saying goes, dancing with himself.

A few lines of text appear briefly at the lower left-hand corner of the screen, listing the name of the band, the song's title, the record label, and the year of release, as if this were an old music video airing on MTV: Oingo Boingo, "Dead Man's Party," MCA Records, 1985.

When the lyrics kick in, Halliday begins to lip-synch along, still gyrating: "All dressed up with nowhere to go. Walking with a dead man over my shoulder. Don't run away, it's only me. . . ."

He abruptly stops dancing and makes a cutting motion with his right hand, silencing the music. At the same moment, the dancers and the gymnasium behind him vanish, and the scene around him suddenly changes.

Halliday now stands at the front of a funeral parlor, next to an open casket.† A second, much older Halliday lies inside the casket, his body emaciated and ravaged by cancer. Shiny quarters cover each of his eyelids.‡

The younger Halliday gazes down at the corpse of his older self with mock sadness, then turns to address the assembled mourners.§ Halliday snaps his fingers and a scroll appears in his right hand. He opens it with a flourish and it unfurls to the floor, unraveling down the aisle in front of him. He breaks the fourth wall, addressing the viewer, and begins to read.

"I, James Donovan Halliday, being of sound mind and disposing memory, do hereby make, publish, and declare this instrument to be my last will and testament, hereby revoking any and all wills and codicils by me

*Careful analysis of this scene reveals that all of the teenagers behind Halliday are actually extras from various John Hughes teen films who have been digitally cut-and-pasted into the video.

†His surroundings are actually from a scene in the 1989 film *Heathers*. Halliday appears to have digitally re-created the funeral parlor set and then inserted himself into it.

‡High-resolution scrutiny reveals that both quarters were minted in 1984.

§The mourners are actually all actors and extras from the same funeral scene in *Heathers*. Winona Ryder and Christian Slater are clearly visible in the audience, sitting near the back.

at any time heretofore made. . . .” He continues reading, faster and faster, plowing through several more paragraphs of legalese, until he’s speaking so rapidly that the words are unintelligible. Then he stops abruptly. “Forget it,” he says. “Even at that speed, it would take me a month to read the whole thing. Sad to say, I don’t have that kind of time.” He drops the scroll and it vanishes in a shower of gold dust. “Let me just give you the highlights.”

The funeral parlor vanishes, and the scene changes once again. Halliday now stands in front of an immense bank vault door. “My entire estate, including a controlling share of stock in my company, Gregarious Simulation Systems, is to be placed in escrow until such time as a single condition I have set forth in my will is met. The first individual to meet that condition will inherit my entire fortune, currently valued in excess of two hundred and forty billion dollars.”

The vault door swings open and Halliday walks inside. The interior of the vault is enormous, and it contains a huge stack of gold bars, roughly the size of a large house. “Here’s the dough I’m putting up for grabs,” Halliday says, grinning broadly. “What the hell. You can’t take it with you, right?”

Halliday leans against the stack of gold bars, and the camera pulls in tight on his face. “Now, I’m sure you’re wondering, what do you have to do to get your hands on all this moolah? Well, hold your horses, kids. I’m getting to that. . . .” He pauses dramatically, his expression changing to that of a child about to reveal a very big secret.

Halliday snaps his fingers again and the vault disappears. In the same instant, Halliday shrinks and morphs into a small boy wearing brown corduroys and a faded *The Muppet Show* T-shirt.* The young Halliday stands in a cluttered living room with burnt orange carpeting, wood-paneled walls, and kitschy late-’70s decor. A 21-inch Zenith television sits nearby, with an Atari 2600 game console hooked up to it.

“This was the first videogame system I ever owned,” Halliday says, now in a child’s voice. “An Atari 2600. I got it for Christmas in 1979.” He plops down in front of the Atari, picks up a joystick, and begins to play. “My favorite game was this one,” he says, nodding at the TV screen,

*Halliday now looks exactly as he did in a school photo taken in 1980, when he was eight years old.

where a small square is traveling through a series of simple mazes. “It was called Adventure. Like many early videogames, Adventure was designed and programmed by just one person. But back then, Atari refused to give its programmers credit for their work, so the name of a game’s creator didn’t actually appear anywhere on the packaging.” On the TV screen, we see Halliday use a sword to slay a red dragon, although due to the game’s crude low-resolution graphics, this looks more like a square using an arrow to stab a deformed duck.

“So the guy who created Adventure, a man named Warren Robinett, decided to hide his name inside the game itself. He hid a key in one of the game’s labyrinths. If you found this key, a small pixel-sized gray dot, you could use it to enter a secret room where Robinett had hidden his name.” On the TV, Halliday guides his square protagonist into the game’s secret room, where the words `CREATED BY WARREN ROBINETT` appear in the center of the screen.

“This,” Halliday says, pointing to the screen with genuine reverence, “was the very first videogame Easter egg. Robinett hid it in his game’s code without telling a soul, and Atari manufactured and shipped Adventure all over the world without knowing about the secret room. They didn’t find out about the Easter egg’s existence until a few months later, when kids all over the world began to discover it. I was one of those kids, and finding Robinett’s Easter egg for the first time was one of the coolest videogaming experiences of my life.”

The young Halliday drops his joystick and stands. As he does, the living room fades away, and the scene shifts again. Halliday now stands in a dim cavern, where light from unseen torches flickers off the damp walls. In the same instant, Halliday’s appearance also changes once again, as he morphs into his famous OASIS avatar, Anorak—a tall, robed wizard with a slightly more handsome version of the adult Halliday’s face (minus the eyeglasses). Anorak is dressed in his trademark black robes, with his avatar’s emblem (a large calligraphic letter “A”) embroidered on each sleeve.

“Before I died,” Anorak says, speaking in a much deeper voice, “I created my own Easter egg, and hid it somewhere inside my most popular videogame—the OASIS. The first person to find my Easter egg will inherit my entire fortune.”

Another dramatic pause.

“The egg is well hidden. I didn’t just leave it lying under a rock some-

where. I suppose you could say that it's locked inside a safe that is buried in a secret room that lies hidden at the center of a maze located somewhere"—he reaches up to tap his right temple—"up here.

"But don't worry. I've left a few clues lying around to get everyone started. And here's the first one." Anorak makes a grand gesture with his right hand, and three keys appear, spinning slowly in the air in front of him. They appear to be made of copper, jade, and clear crystal. As the keys continue to spin, Anorak recites a piece of verse, and as he speaks each line, it appears briefly in flaming subtitles across the bottom of screen:

*Three hidden keys open three secret gates
Wherein the errant will be tested for worthy traits
And those with the skill to survive these straits
Will reach The End where the prize awaits*

As he finishes, the jade and crystal keys vanish, leaving only the copper key, which now hangs on a chain around Anorak's neck.

The camera follows Anorak as he turns and continues farther into the dark cavern. A few seconds later, he arrives at a pair of massive wooden doors set into the cavern's rocky wall. These doors are banded with steel, and there are shields and dragons carved into their surfaces. "I couldn't playtest this particular game, so I worry that I may have hidden my Easter egg a little too well. Made it too difficult to reach. I'm not sure. If that's the case, it's too late to change anything now. So I guess we'll see."

Anorak throws open the double doors, revealing an immense treasure room filled with piles of glittering gold coins and jewel-encrusted goblets.* Then he steps into the open doorway and turns to face the viewer, stretching out his arms to hold open the giant double doors.†

*Analysis reveals dozens of curious items hidden among the mounds of treasure, most notably: several early home computers (an Apple IIe, a Commodore 64, an Atari 800XL, and a TRS-80 Color Computer 2), dozens of videogame controllers for a variety of game systems, and hundreds of polyhedral dice like those used in old tabletop role-playing games.

†A freeze-frame of this scene appears nearly identical to a painting by Jeff Easley that appeared on the cover of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*, a Dungeons & Dragons rulebook published in 1983.

“So without further ado,” Anorak announces, “let the hunt for Halliday’s Easter egg begin!” Then he vanishes in a flash of light, leaving the viewer to gaze through the open doorway at the glittering mounds of treasure that lay beyond.

Then the screen fades to black.



At the end of the video, Halliday included a link to his personal website, which had changed drastically on the morning of his death. For over a decade, the only thing posted there had been a short looping animation that showed his avatar, Anorak, sitting in a medieval library, hunched over a scarred worktable, mixing potions and poring over dusty spellbooks, with a large painting of a black dragon visible on the wall behind him.

But now that animation was gone, and in its place there was a high-score list like those that used to appear in old coin-operated videogames. The list had ten numbered spots, and each displayed the initials JDH—James Donovan Halliday—followed by a score of six zeros. This high-score list quickly came to be known as “the Scoreboard.”

Just below the Scoreboard was an icon that looked like a small leather-bound book, which linked to a free downloadable copy of *Anorak’s Almanac*, a collection of hundreds of Halliday’s undated journal entries. The *Almanac* was over a thousand pages long, but it contained few details about Halliday’s personal life or his day-to-day activities. Most of the entries were his stream-of-consciousness observations on various classic videogames, science-fiction and fantasy novels, movies, comic books, and ’80s pop culture, mixed with humorous diatribes denouncing everything from organized religion to diet soda.

The Hunt, as the contest came to be known, quickly wove its way into global culture. Like winning the lottery, finding Halliday’s Easter egg became a popular fantasy among adults and children alike. It was a game anyone could play, and at first, there seemed to be no right or wrong way to play it. The only thing *Anorak’s Almanac* seemed to indicate was that a familiarity with Halliday’s various obsessions would be essential to finding the egg. This led to a global fascination with 1980s pop culture. Fifty years after the decade had ended, the movies, music, games, and fashions of the 1980s were all the rage once again. By 2041, spiked hair and acid-washed jeans were back in style, and covers of hit ’80s pop songs by con-

temporary bands dominated the music charts. People who had actually been teenagers in the 1980s, all now approaching old age, had the strange experience of seeing the fads and fashions of their youth embraced and studied by their grandchildren.

A new subculture was born, composed of the millions of people who now devoted every free moment of their lives to searching for Halliday's egg. At first, these individuals were known simply as "egg hunters," but this was quickly truncated to the nickname "gunters."

During the first year of the Hunt, being a gunter was highly fashionable, and nearly every OASIS user claimed to be one.

When the first anniversary of Halliday's death arrived, the fervor surrounding the contest began to die down. An entire year had passed and no one had found anything. Not a single key or gate. Part of the problem was the sheer size of the OASIS. It contained thousands of simulated worlds where the keys might be hidden, and it could take a gunter years to conduct a thorough search of any one of them.

Despite all of the "professional" gunters who boasted on their blogs that they were getting closer to a breakthrough every day, the truth gradually became apparent: No one really even knew exactly what it was they were looking for, or where to start looking for it.

Another year passed.

And another.

Still nothing.

The general public lost all interest in the contest. People began to assume it was all just an outlandish hoax perpetrated by a rich nut job. Others believed that even if the egg really did exist, no one was ever going to find it. Meanwhile, the OASIS continued to evolve and grow in popularity, protected from takeover attempts and legal challenges by the ironclad terms of Halliday's will and the army of rabid lawyers he had tasked with administering his estate.

Halliday's Easter egg gradually moved into the realm of urban legend, and the ever-dwindling tribe of gunters gradually became the object of ridicule. Each year, on the anniversary of Halliday's death, newscasters jokingly reported on their continued lack of progress. And each year, more gunters called it quits, concluding that Halliday had indeed made the egg impossible to find.

And another year went by.

And another.

Then, on the evening of February 11, 2045, an avatar's name appeared at the top of the Scoreboard, for the whole world to see. After five long years, the Copper Key had finally been found, by an eighteen-year-old kid living in a trailer park on the outskirts of Oklahoma City.

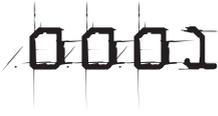
That kid was me.

Dozens of books, cartoons, movies, and miniseries have attempted to tell the story of everything that happened next, but every single one of them got it wrong. So I want to set the record straight, once and for all.

Level One

Being human totally sucks most of the time.
Videogames are the only thing that
make life bearable.

—*Anorak's Almanac*, Chapter 91, Verses 1-2



I was jolted awake by the sound of gunfire in one of the neighboring stacks. The shots were followed by a few minutes of muffled shouting and screaming, then silence.

Gunfire wasn't uncommon in the stacks, but it still shook me up. I knew I probably wouldn't be able to fall back asleep, so I decided to kill the remaining hours until dawn by brushing up on a few coin-op classics. Galaga, Defender, Asteroids. These games were outdated digital dinosaurs that had become museum pieces long before I was born. But I was a gunter, so I didn't think of them as quaint low-res antiques. To me, they were hallowed artifacts. Pillars of the pantheon. When I played the classics, I did so with a determined sort of reverence.

I was curled up in an old sleeping bag in the corner of the trailer's tiny laundry room, wedged into the gap between the wall and the dryer. I wasn't welcome in my aunt's room across the hall, which was fine by me. I preferred to crash in the laundry room anyway. It was warm, it afforded me a limited amount of privacy, and the wireless reception wasn't too bad. And, as an added bonus, the room smelled like liquid detergent and fabric softener. The rest of the trailer reeked of cat piss and abject poverty.

Most of the time I slept in my hideout. But the temperature had dropped below zero the past few nights, and as much as I hated staying at my aunt's place, it still beat freezing to death.

A total of fifteen people lived in my aunt's trailer. She slept in the smallest of its three bedrooms. The Depperts lived in the bedroom adjacent to

hers, and the Millers occupied the large master bedroom at the end of the hall. There were six of them, and they paid the largest share of the rent. Our trailer wasn't as crowded as some of the other units in the stacks. It was a double-wide. Plenty of room for everybody.

I pulled out my laptop and powered it on. It was a bulky, heavy beast, almost ten years old. I'd found it in a trash bin behind the abandoned strip mall across the highway. I'd been able to coax it back to life by replacing its system memory and reloading the stone-age operating system. The processor was slower than a sloth by current standards, but it was fine for my needs. The laptop served as my portable research library, video arcade, and home theater system. Its hard drive was filled with old books, movies, TV show episodes, song files, and nearly every videogame made in the twentieth century.

I booted up my emulator and selected *Robotron: 2084*, one of my all-time favorite games. I'd always loved its frenetic pace and brutal simplicity. *Robotron* was all about instinct and reflexes. 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.*

I spent a few hours blasting through wave after wave of Brains, Spheroids, Quarks, and Hulks in my unending battle to *Save the Last Human Family!* But eventually my fingers started to cramp up and I began to lose my rhythm. When that happened at this level, things deteriorated quickly. I burned through all of my extra lives in a matter of minutes, and my two least-favorite words appeared on the screen: **GAME OVER.**

I shut down the emulator and began to browse through my video files. Over the past five years, I'd downloaded every single movie, TV show, and cartoon mentioned in *Anorak's Almanac*. I still hadn't watched all of them yet, of course. That would probably take decades.

I selected an episode of *Family Ties*, an '80s sitcom about a middle-class family living in central Ohio. I'd downloaded the show because it had been one of Halliday's favorites, and I figured there was a chance that some clue related to the Hunt might be hidden in one of the episodes. I'd

become addicted to the show immediately, and had now watched all 180 episodes, multiple times. I never seemed to get tired of them.

Sitting alone in the dark, watching the show on my laptop, I always found myself imagining that *I* lived in that warm, well-lit house, and that those smiling, understanding people were *my* family. That there was nothing so wrong in the world that we couldn't sort it out by the end of a single half-hour episode (or maybe a two-parter, if it was something really serious).

My own home life had never even remotely resembled the one depicted in *Family Ties*, which was probably why I loved the show so much. I was the only child of two teenagers, both refugees who'd met in the stacks where I'd grown up. I don't remember my father. When I was just a few months old, he was shot dead while looting a grocery store during a power blackout. The only thing I really knew about him was that he loved comic books. I'd found several old flash drives in a box of his things, containing complete runs of *The Amazing Spider-Man*, *The X-Men*, and *Green Lantern*. My mom once told me that my dad had given me an alliterative name, Wade Watts, because he thought it sounded like the secret identity of a superhero. Like Peter Parker or Clark Kent. Knowing that made me think he must have been a cool guy, despite how he'd died.

My mother, Loretta, had raised me on her own. We'd lived in a small RV in another part of the stacks. She had two full-time OASIS jobs, one as a telemarketer, the other as an escort in an online brothel. She used to make me wear earplugs at night so I wouldn't hear her in the next room, talking dirty to tricks in other time zones. But the earplugs didn't work very well, so I would watch old movies instead, with the volume turned way up.

I was introduced to the OASIS at an early age, because my mother used it as a virtual babysitter. As soon as I was old enough to wear a visor and a pair of haptic gloves, my mom helped me create my first OASIS avatar. Then she stuck me in a corner and went back to work, leaving me to explore an entirely new world, very different from the one I'd known up until then.

From that moment on, I was more or less raised by the OASIS's interactive educational programs, which any kid could access for free. I spent a big chunk of my childhood hanging out in a virtual-reality simulation of Sesame Street, singing songs with friendly Muppets and playing interactive games that taught me how to walk, talk, add, subtract, read, write, and share. Once I'd mastered those skills, it didn't take me long to discover that the OASIS was also the world's biggest public library, where

even a penniless kid like me had access to every book ever written, every song ever recorded, and every movie, television show, videogame, and piece of artwork ever created. The collected knowledge, art, and amusements of all human civilization were there, waiting for me. But gaining access to all of that information turned out to be something of a mixed blessing. Because that was when I found out the truth.



I don't know, maybe your experience differed from mine. For me, growing up as a human being on the planet Earth in the twenty-first century was a real kick in the teeth. Existentially speaking.

The worst thing about being a kid was that no one told me the truth about my situation. In fact, they did the exact opposite. And, of course, I believed them, because I was just a kid and I didn't know any better. I mean, Christ, my brain hadn't even grown to full size yet, so how could I be expected to know when the adults were bullshitting me?

So I swallowed all of the dark ages nonsense they fed me. Some time passed. I grew up a little, and I gradually began to figure out that pretty much *everyone* had been lying to me about pretty much *everything* since the moment I emerged from my mother's womb.

This was an alarming revelation.

It gave me trust issues later in life.

I started to figure out the ugly truth as soon as I began to explore the free OASIS libraries. The facts were right there waiting for me, hidden in old books written by people who weren't afraid to be honest. Artists and scientists and philosophers and poets, many of them long dead. As I read the words they'd left behind, I finally began to get a grip on the situation. My situation. *Our* situation. What most people referred to as "the human condition."

It was not good news.

I wish someone had just told me the truth right up front, as soon as I was old enough to understand it. I wish someone had just said:

"Here's the deal, Wade. You're something called a 'human being.' That's a really smart kind of animal. Like every other animal on this planet, we're descended from a single-celled organism that lived millions of years ago. This happened by a process called evolution, and you'll learn more about it later. But trust me, that's really how we all got here. There's proof of it everywhere, buried in the rocks. That story you heard? About how

we were all created by a super-powerful dude named God who lives up in the sky? Total bullshit. The whole God thing is actually an ancient fairy tale that people have been telling one another for thousands of years. We made it all up. Like Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny.

“Oh, and by the way . . . there’s no Santa Claus or Easter Bunny. Also bullshit. Sorry, kid. Deal with it.

“You’re probably wondering what happened before you got here. An awful lot of stuff, actually. Once we evolved into humans, things got pretty interesting. We figured out how to grow food and domesticate animals so we didn’t have to spend all of our time hunting. Our tribes got much bigger, and we spread across the entire planet like an unstoppable virus. Then, after fighting a bunch of wars with each other over land, resources, and our made-up gods, we eventually got all of our tribes organized into a ‘global civilization.’ But, honestly, it wasn’t all that organized, or civilized, and we continued to fight a lot of wars with each other. But we also figured out how to do science, which helped us develop technology. For a bunch of hairless apes, we’ve actually managed to invent some pretty incredible things. Computers. Medicine. Lasers. Microwave ovens. Artificial hearts. Atomic bombs. We even sent a few guys to the moon and brought them back. We also created a global communications network that lets us all talk to each other, all around the world, all the time. Pretty impressive, right?

“But that’s where the bad news comes in. Our global civilization came at a huge cost. We needed a whole bunch of energy to build it, and we got that energy by burning fossil fuels, which came from dead plants and animals buried deep in the ground. We used up most of this fuel before you got here, and now it’s pretty much all gone. This means that we no longer have enough energy to keep our civilization running like it was before. So we’ve had to cut back. Big-time. We call this the Global Energy Crisis, and it’s been going on for a while now.

“Also, it turns out that burning all of those fossil fuels had some nasty side effects, like raising the temperature of our planet and screwing up the environment. So now the polar ice caps are melting, sea levels are rising, and the weather is all messed up. Plants and animals are dying off in record numbers, and lots of people are starving and homeless. And we’re still fighting wars with each other, mostly over the few resources we have left.

“Basically, kid, what this all means is that life is a lot tougher than it used to be, in the Good Old Days, back before you were born. Things used

to be awesome, but now they're kinda terrifying. To be honest, the future doesn't look too bright. You were born at a pretty crappy time in history. And it looks like things are only gonna get worse from here on out. Human civilization is in 'decline.' Some people even say it's 'collapsing.'

"You're probably wondering what's going to happen to you. That's easy. The same thing is going to happen to you that has happened to every other human being who has ever lived. You're going to die. We all die. That's just how it is.

"What happens when you die? Well, we're not completely sure. But the evidence seems to suggest that *nothing* happens. You're just dead, your brain stops working, and then you're not around to ask annoying questions anymore. Those stories you heard? About going to a wonderful place called 'heaven' where there is no more pain or death and you live forever in a state of perpetual happiness? Also total bullshit. Just like all that God stuff. There's no evidence of a heaven and there never was. We made that up too. Wishful thinking. So now you have to live the rest of your life knowing you're going to die someday and disappear forever.

"Sorry."



OK, on second thought, maybe honesty isn't the best policy after all. Maybe it isn't a good idea to tell a newly arrived human being that he's been born into a world of chaos, pain, and poverty just in time to watch everything fall to pieces. I discovered all of that gradually over several years, and it still made me feel like jumping off a bridge.

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.

The OASIS is the setting of all my happiest childhood memories. When my mom didn't have to work, we would log in at the same time and play games or go on interactive storybook adventures together. She used to have to force me to log out every night, because I never wanted to return to the real world. Because the real world sucked.

I never blamed my mom for the way things were. She was a victim of fate and cruel circumstance, like everyone else. Her generation had it the hardest. She'd been born into a world of plenty, then had to watch it all slowly vanish. More than anything, I remember feeling sorry for her. She

was depressed all the time, and taking drugs seemed to be the only thing she truly enjoyed. Of course, they were what eventually killed her. When I was eleven years old, she shot a bad batch of something into her arm and died on our ratty fold-out sofa bed while listening to music on an old mp3 player I'd repaired and given to her the previous Christmas.

That was when I had to move in with my mom's sister, Alice. Aunt Alice didn't take me in out of kindness or familial responsibility. She did it to get the extra food vouchers from the government every month. Most of the time, I had to find food on my own. This usually wasn't a problem, because I had a talent for finding and fixing old computers and busted OASIS consoles, which I sold to pawnshops or traded for food vouchers. I earned enough to keep from going hungry, which was more than a lot of my neighbors could say.

The year after my mom died, I spent a lot of time wallowing in self-pity and despair. I tried to look on the bright side, to remind myself that, orphaned or not, I was still better off than most of the kids in Africa. And Asia. And North America, too. I'd always had a roof over my head and more than enough food to eat. And I had the OASIS. My life wasn't so bad. At least that's what I kept telling myself, in a vain attempt to stave off the epic loneliness I now felt.

Then the Hunt for Halliday's Easter egg began. That was what saved me, I think. Suddenly I'd found something worth doing. A dream worth chasing. For the last five years, the Hunt had given me a goal and purpose. A quest to fulfill. A reason to get up in the morning. Something to look forward to.

The moment I began searching for the egg, the future no longer seemed so bleak.



I was halfway through the fourth episode of my *Family Ties* mini-marathon when the laundry room door creaked open and my aunt Alice walked in, a malnourished harpy in a housecoat, clutching a basket of dirty clothes. She looked more lucid than usual, which was bad news. She was much easier to deal with when she was high.

She glanced over at me with the usual look of disdain and started to load her clothes into the washer. Then her expression changed and she peeked around the dryer to get a better look at me. Her eyes went wide

when she spotted my laptop. I quickly closed it and began to shove it into my backpack, but I knew it was already too late.

“Hand it over, Wade,” she ordered, reaching for the laptop. “I can pawn it to help pay our rent.”

“No!” I shouted, twisting away from her. “Come on, Aunt Alice. I need it for school.”

“What you *need* is to show some *gratitude!*” she barked. “Everyone else around here has to pay rent. I’m tired of you leeching off of me!”

“You keep all of my food vouchers. That more than covers my share of the rent.”

“The hell it does!” She tried again to grab the laptop out of my hands, but I refused to let go of it. So she turned and stomped back to her room. I knew what was coming next, so I quickly entered a command on my laptop that locked its keyboard and erased the hard drive.

Aunt Alice returned a few seconds later with her boyfriend, Rick, who was still half-asleep. Rick was perpetually shirtless, because he liked to show off his impressive collection of prison tattoos. Without saying a word, he walked over and raised a fist at me threateningly. I flinched and handed over the laptop. Then he and Aunt Alice walked out, already discussing how much the computer might fetch at a pawnshop.

Losing the laptop wasn’t a big deal. I had two spares stowed in my hide-out. But they weren’t nearly as fast, and I would have to reload all of my media onto them from backup drives. A total pain in the ass. But it was my own fault. I knew the risk of bringing anything of value back here.

The dark blue light of dawn was starting to creep in through the laundry room window. I decided it might be a good idea to leave for school a little early today.

I dressed as quickly and quietly as possible, pulling on the worn corduroys, baggy sweater, and oversize coat that comprised my entire winter wardrobe. Then I put on my backpack and climbed up onto the washing machine. After pulling on my gloves, I slid open the frost-covered window. The arctic morning air stung my cheeks as I gazed out over the uneven sea of trailer rooftops.

My aunt’s trailer was the top unit in a “stack” twenty-two mobile homes high, making it a level or two taller than the majority of the stacks immediately surrounding it. The trailers on the bottom level rested on the ground, or on their original concrete foundations, but the units stacked

above them were suspended on a reinforced modular scaffold, a haphazard metal latticework that had been constructed piecemeal over the years.

We lived in the Portland Avenue Stacks, a sprawling hive of discolored tin shoeboxes rusting on the shores of I-40, just west of Oklahoma City's decaying skyscraper core. It was a collection of over five hundred individual stacks, all connected to each other by a makeshift network of recycled pipes, girders, support beams, and footbridges. The spires of a dozen ancient construction cranes (used to do the actual stacking) were positioned around the stacks' ever-expanding outer perimeter.

The top level or "roof" of the stacks was blanketed with a patchwork array of old solar panels that provided supplemental power to the units below. A bundle of hoses and corrugated tubing snaked up and down the side of each stack, supplying water to each trailer and carrying away sewage (luxuries not available in some of the other stacks scattered around the city). Very little sunlight made it to the bottom level (known as the "floor"). The dark, narrow strips of ground between the stacks were clogged with the skeletons of abandoned cars and trucks, their gas tanks emptied and their exit routes blocked off long ago.

One of our neighbors, Mr. Miller, once explained to me that trailer parks like ours had originally consisted of a few dozen mobile homes arranged in neat rows on the ground. But after the oil crash and the onset of the energy crisis, large cities had been flooded with refugees from surrounding suburban and rural areas, resulting in a massive urban housing shortage. Real estate within walking distance of a big city became far too valuable to waste on a flat plane of mobile homes, so someone had cooked up the brilliant idea of, as Mr. Miller put it, "stacking the sumbitches," to maximize the use of ground space. The idea caught on in a big way, and trailer parks across the country had quickly evolved into "stacks" like this one—strange hybrids of shantytowns, squatter settlements, and refugee camps. They were now scattered around the outskirts of most major cities, each one overflowing with uprooted rednecks like my parents, who—desperate for work, food, electricity, and reliable OASIS access—had fled their dying small towns and had used the last of their gasoline (or their beasts of burden) to haul their families, RVs, and trailer homes to the nearest metropolis.

Every stack in our park stood at least fifteen mobile homes high (with the occasional RV, shipping container, Airstream trailer, or VW microbus

mixed in for variety). In recent years, many of the stacks had grown to a height of twenty units or more. This made a lot of people nervous. Stack collapses weren't that uncommon, and if the scaffold supports buckled at the wrong angle, the domino effect could bring down four or five of the neighboring stacks too.

Our trailer was near the northern edge of the stacks, which ran up to a crumbling highway overpass. From my vantage point at the laundry room window, I could see a thin stream of electric vehicles crawling along the cracked asphalt, carrying goods and workers into the city. As I stared out at the grim skyline, a bright sliver of the sun peeked over the horizon. Watching it rise, I performed a mental ritual: Whenever I saw the sun, I reminded myself that I was looking at a *star*. One of over a hundred billion stars in our galaxy. A galaxy that was just one of billions of other galaxies in the observable universe. This helped me keep things in perspective. I'd started doing it after watching a science program from the early '80s called *Cosmos*.

I slipped out the window as quietly as possible and, clutching the bottom of the window frame, slid down the cold surface of the trailer's metal siding. The steel platform on which the trailer rested was only slightly wider and longer than the trailer itself, leaving a ledge about a foot and a half wide all the way around. I carefully lowered myself until my feet rested on this ledge, then reached up to close the window behind me. I grabbed hold of a rope I'd strung there at waist level to serve as a handhold and began to sidestep along the ledge to the corner of the platform. From there I was able to descend the ladderlike frame of the scaffolding. I almost always took this route when leaving or returning to my aunt's trailer. A rickety metal staircase was bolted to the side of the stack, but it shook and knocked against the scaffolding, so I couldn't use it without announcing my presence. Bad news. In the stacks, it was best to avoid being heard or seen, whenever possible. There were often dangerous and desperate people about—the sort who would rob you, rape you, and then sell your organs on the black market.

Descending the network of metal girders had always reminded me of old platform videogames like *Donkey Kong* or *BurgerTime*. I'd seized upon this idea a few years earlier when I coded my first Atari 2600 game (a gunter rite of passage, like a Jedi building his first lightsaber). It was a Pitfall rip-off called *The Stacks* where you had to navigate through a vertical maze of trailers, collecting junk computers, snagging food-voucher

power-ups, and avoiding meth addicts and pedophiles on your way to school. My game was a lot more fun than the real thing.

As I climbed down, I paused next to the Airstream trailer three units below ours, where my friend Mrs. Gilmore lived. She was a sweet old lady in her mid-seventies, and she always seemed to get up ridiculously early. I peeked in her window and saw her shuffling around in her kitchen, making breakfast. She spotted me after a few seconds, and her eyes lit up.

“Wade!” she said, cracking open her window. “Good morning, my dear boy.”

“Good morning, Mrs. G,” I said. “I hope I didn’t startle you.”

“Not at all,” she said. She pulled her robe tight against the draft coming in the window. “It’s freezing out there! Why don’t you come in and have some breakfast? I’ve got some soy bacon. And these powdered eggs aren’t too bad, if you put enough salt on them. . . .”

“Thanks, but I can’t this morning, Mrs. G. I have to get to school.”

“All right. Rain check, then.” She blew me a kiss and started to close the window. “Try not to break your neck climbing around out there, OK, Spider-Man?”

“Will do. See ya later, Mrs. G.” I waved good-bye to her and continued my descent.

Mrs. Gilmore was a total sweetheart. She let me crash on her couch when I needed to, although it was hard for me to sleep there because of all her cats. Mrs. G was super-religious and spent most of her time in the OASIS, sitting in the congregation of one of those big online mega-churches, singing hymns, listening to sermons, and taking virtual tours of the Holy Land. I fixed her ancient OASIS console whenever it went on the fritz, and in return, she answered my endless questions about what it had been like for her to grow up during the 1980s. She knew the coolest bits of ’80s trivia—stuff you couldn’t learn from books or movies. She was always praying for me too. Trying her hardest to save my soul. I never had the heart to tell her that I thought organized religion was a total crock. It was a pleasant fantasy that gave her hope and kept her going—which was exactly what the Hunt was for me. To quote the *Almanac*: “People who live in glass houses should shut the fuck up.”

When I reached the bottom level, I jumped off the scaffold and dropped the few remaining feet to the ground. My rubber boots crunched into the slush and frozen mud. It was still pretty dark down here, so I took out my flashlight and headed east, weaving my way through the dark maze,

doing my best to remain unseen while being careful to avoid tripping over a shopping cart, engine block, or one of the other pieces of junk littering the narrow alleys between the stacks. I rarely saw anyone out at this time of the morning. The commuter shuttles ran only a few times a day, so the residents lucky enough to have a job would already be waiting at the bus stop by the highway. Most of them worked as day laborers in the giant factory farms that surrounded the city.

After walking about half a mile, I reached a giant mound of old cars and trucks piled haphazardly along the stacks' eastern perimeter. Decades ago, the cranes had cleared the park of as many abandoned vehicles as possible, to make room for even more stacks, and they'd dumped them in huge piles like this one all around the settlement's perimeter. Many of them were nearly as tall as the stacks themselves.

I walked to the edge of the pile, and after a quick glance around to make sure I wasn't being watched or followed, I turned sideways to squeeze through a gap between two crushed cars. From there, I ducked, clambered, and sidestepped my way farther and farther into the ramshackle mountain of twisted metal, until I reached a small open space at the rear of a buried cargo van. Only the rear third of the van was visible. The rest was concealed by the other vehicles stacked on and around it. Two overturned pickup trucks lay across the van's roof at different angles, but most of their weight was supported by the cars stacked on either side, creating a kind of protective arch that had prevented the van from being crushed by the mountain of vehicles piled above it.

I pulled out a chain I kept around my neck, on which there hung a single key. In a stroke of luck, this key had still been hanging from the van's ignition when I'd first discovered it. Many of these vehicles had been in working condition when they were abandoned. Their owners had simply no longer been able to afford fuel for them, so they'd just parked them and walked away.

I pocketed my flashlight and unlocked the van's rear right door. It opened about a foot and a half, giving me just enough room to squeeze inside. I pulled the door closed behind me and locked it again. The van's rear doors had no windows, so I was hunched over in total darkness for a second, until my fingers found the old power strip I'd duct-taped to the ceiling. I flipped it on, and an old desk lamp flooded the tiny space with light.

The crumpled green roof of a compact car covered the crushed open-

ing where the windshield had been, but the damage to the van's front end didn't extend beyond the cab. The rest of the interior remained intact. Someone had removed all of the van's seats (probably to use as furniture), leaving a small "room" about four feet wide, four feet high, and nine feet long.

This was my hideout.

I'd discovered it four years earlier, while searching for discarded computer parts. When I first opened the door and gazed into the van's darkened interior, I knew right away that I'd found something of immeasurable value: privacy. This was a place no one else knew about, where I wouldn't have to worry about getting hassled or slapped around by my aunt or whatever loser she was currently dating. I could keep my things here without worrying they'd be stolen. And, most important, it was a place where I could access the OASIS in peace.

The van was my refuge. My Batcave. My Fortress of Solitude. It was where I attended school, did my homework, read books, watched movies, and played videogames. It was also where I conducted my ongoing quest to find Halliday's Easter egg.

I'd covered the walls, floor, and ceiling with Styrofoam egg cartons and pieces of carpeting in an effort to soundproof the van as much as possible. Several cardboard boxes of busted laptops and computer parts sat in the corner, next to a rack of old car batteries and a modified exercise bike I'd rigged up as a recharger. The only furniture was a folding lawn chair.

I dropped my backpack, shrugged off my coat, and hopped on the exercise bike. Charging the batteries was usually the only physical exercise I got each day. I pedaled until the meter said the batteries had a full charge, then sat down in my chair and switched on the small electric heater I kept beside it. I pulled off my gloves and rubbed my hands in front of the filaments as they began to glow bright orange. I couldn't leave the heater on for very long, or it would drain the batteries.

I opened the rat-proof metal box where I kept my food cache and took out some bottled water and a packet of powdered milk. I mixed these together in a bowl, then dumped in a generous serving of Fruit Rocks cereal. Once I'd wolfed it down, I retrieved an old plastic *Star Trek* lunch box I kept hidden under the van's crushed dashboard. Inside were my school-issued OASIS console, haptic gloves, and visor. These items were, by far, the most valuable things I owned. Far too valuable to carry around with me.

I pulled on my elastic haptic gloves and flexed my fingers to make sure none of the joints was sticking. Then I grabbed my OASIS console, a flat black rectangle about the size of a paperback book. It had a wireless network antenna built into it, but the reception inside the van was for shit, since it was buried under a huge mound of dense metal. So I'd rigged up an external antenna and mounted it on the hood of a car at the top of the junk pile. The antenna cable snaked up through a hole I'd punched in the van's ceiling. I plugged it into a port on the side of the console, then slipped on my visor. It fit snugly around my eyes like a pair of swimmer's goggles, blocking out all external light. Small earbuds extended from the visor's temples and automatically plugged themselves into my ears. The visor also housed two built-in stereo voice microphones to pick up everything I said.

I powered on the console and initiated the log-in sequence. I saw a brief flash of red as the visor scanned my retinas. Then I cleared my throat and said my log-in pass phrase, being careful to enunciate: "You have been recruited by the Star League to defend the Frontier against Xur and the Ko-Dan Armada."

My pass phrase was also verified, along with my voice pattern, and then I was logged in. The following text appeared, superimposed in the center of my virtual display:

Identity verification successful.
Welcome to the OASIS, Parzival!
Login Completed: 07:53:21 OST-2.10.2045

As the text faded away, it was replaced by a short message, just three words long. This message had been embedded in the log-in sequence by James Halliday himself, when he'd first programmed the OASIS, as an homage to the simulation's direct ancestors, the coin-operated video-games of his youth. These three words were always the last thing an OASIS user saw before leaving the real world and entering the virtual one:

READY PLAYER ONE



My avatar materialized in front of my locker on the second floor of my high school—the exact spot where I’d been standing when I’d logged out the night before.

I glanced up and down the hallway. 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.

I touched my locker door and it popped open with a soft metallic click. The inside was sparsely decorated. A picture of Princess Leia posing with a blaster pistol. A group photo of the members of Monty Python in their *Holy Grail* costumes. James Halliday’s *Time* magazine cover. I reached up and tapped the stack of textbooks on the locker’s top shelf and they vanished, then reappeared in my avatar’s item inventory.

Aside from my textbooks, my avatar had only a few meager possessions: a flashlight, an iron shortsword, a small bronze shield, and a suit of banded leather armor. These items were all nonmagical and of low quality, but they were the best I could afford. Items in the OASIS had just as much value as things in the real world (sometimes more), and you couldn’t pay for them with food vouchers. The OASIS credit was the coin

of the realm, and in these dark times, it was also one of the world's most stable currencies, valued higher than the dollar, pound, euro, or yen.

A small mirror was mounted inside my locker door, and I caught a glimpse of my virtual self as I closed it. I'd designed my avatar's face and body to look, more or less, like my own. My avatar had a slightly smaller nose than me, and he was taller. And thinner. And more muscular. And he didn't have any teenage acne. But aside from these minor details, we looked more or less identical. The school's strictly enforced dress code required that all student avatars be human, and of the same gender and age as the student. No giant two-headed hermaphrodite demon unicorn avatars were allowed. Not on school grounds, anyway.

You could give your OASIS avatar any name you liked, as long as it was unique. Meaning you had to pick a name that hadn't already been taken by someone else. Your avatar's name was also your e-mail address and chat ID, so you wanted it to be cool and easy to remember. Celebrities had been known to pay huge sums of money to buy an avatar name they wanted from a cyber-squatter who had already reserved it.

When I'd first created my OASIS account, I'd named my avatar Wade_the_Great. After that, I kept changing it every few months, usually to something equally ridiculous. But my avatar had now had the same name for over five years. On the day the Hunt began, the day I'd decided to become a gunter, I'd renamed my avatar Parzival, after the knight of Arthurian legend who had found the Holy Grail. The other more common spellings of that knight's name, Perceval and Percival, had already been taken by other users. But I preferred the name Parzival, anyway. I thought it had a nice ring to it.

People rarely used their real names online. Anonymity was one of the major perks of the OASIS. Inside the simulation, no one knew who you really were, unless you wanted them to. Much of the OASIS's popularity and culture were built around this fact. Your real name, fingerprints, and retinal patterns were stored in your OASIS account, but Gregarious Simulation Systems kept that information encrypted and confidential. Even GSS's own employees couldn't look up an avatar's true identity. Back when Halliday was still running the company, GSS had won the right to keep every OASIS user's identity private in a landmark Supreme Court ruling.

When I'd first enrolled in the OASIS public school system, I was re-

quired to give them my real name, avatar name, mailing address, and Social Security number. That information was stored in my student profile, but only my principal had access to that. None of my teachers or fellow students knew who I really was, and vice versa.

Students weren't allowed to use their avatar names while they were at school. This was to prevent teachers from having to say ridiculous things like "Pimp_Grease, please pay attention!" or "BigWang69, would you stand up and give us your book report?" Instead, students were required to use their real first names, followed by a number, to differentiate them from other students with the same name. When I enrolled, there were already two other students at my school with the first name Wade, so I'd been assigned the student ID of Wade3. That name floated above my avatar's head whenever I was on school grounds.

The school bell rang and a warning flashed in the corner of my display, informing me that I had forty minutes until the start of first period. I began to walk my avatar down the hall, using a series of subtle hand motions to control its movements and actions. I could also use voice commands to move around, if my hands were otherwise occupied.

I strolled in the direction of my World History classroom, smiling and waving to the familiar faces I passed. I was going to miss this place when I graduated in a few months. I wasn't looking forward to leaving school. I didn't have the money to attend college, not even one in the OASIS, and my grades weren't good enough for a scholarship. My only plan after graduation was to become a full-time gunter. I didn't have much choice. Winning the contest was my one chance of escaping the stacks. Unless I wanted to sign a five-year indenturement contract with some corporation, and that was about as appealing to me as rolling around in broken glass in my birthday suit.

As I continued down the hallway, other students began to materialize in front of their lockers, ghostly apparitions that rapidly solidified. The sound of chattering teenagers began to echo up and down the corridor. Before long, I heard an insult hurled in my direction.

"Hey, hey! If it isn't Wade Three!" I heard a voice shout. I turned and saw Todd13, an obnoxious avatar I recognized from my Algebra II class. He was standing with several of his friends. "Great outfit, slick," he said. "Where did you snag the sweet threads?"

My avatar was wearing a black T-shirt and blue jeans, one of the free

default skins you could select when you created your account. Like his Cro-Magnon friends, Todd13 wore an expensive designer skin, probably purchased in some offworld mall.

“Your mom bought them for me,” I retorted without breaking my stride. “Tell her I said thanks, the next time you stop at home to breast-feed and pick up your allowance.” Childish, I know. But virtual or not, this was still high school—the more childish an insult, the more effective it was.

My jab elicited laughter from a few of his friends and the other students standing nearby. Todd13 scowled and his face actually turned red—a sign that he hadn’t bothered to turn off his account’s real-time emotion feature, which made your avatar mirror your facial expressions and body language. He was about to reply, but I muted him first, so I didn’t hear what he said. I just smiled and continued on my way.

The ability to mute my peers was one of my favorite things about attending school online, and I took advantage of it almost daily. The best thing about it was that they could *see* that you’d muted them, and they couldn’t do a damn thing about it. There was never any fighting on school grounds. The simulation simply didn’t allow it. The entire planet of Ludus was a no-PvP zone, meaning that no player-versus-player combat was permitted. At this school, the only real weapons were words, so I’d become skilled at wielding them.



I’d attended school in the real world up until the sixth grade. It hadn’t been a very pleasant experience. I was a painfully shy, awkward kid, with low self-esteem and almost no social skills—a side effect of spending most of my childhood inside the OASIS. Online, I didn’t have a problem talking to people or making friends. But in the real world, interacting with other people—especially kids my own age—made me a nervous wreck. I never knew how to act or what to say, and when I did work up the courage to speak, I always seemed to say the wrong thing.

My appearance was part of the problem. I was overweight, and had been for as long as I could remember. My bankrupt diet of government-subsidized sugar-and-starch-laden food was a contributing factor, but I was also an OASIS addict, so the only exercise I usually got back then was running away from bullies before and after school. To make matters worse, my limited wardrobe consisted entirely of ill-fitting clothes from

thrift stores and donation bins—the social equivalent of having a bull’s-eye painted on my forehead.

Even so, I tried my best to fit in. Year after year, my eyes would scan the lunchroom like a T-1000, searching for a clique that might accept me. But even the other outcasts wanted nothing to do with me. I was too weird, even for the weirdos. And girls? Talking to girls was out of the question. To me, they were like some exotic alien species, both beautiful and terrifying. Whenever I got near one of them, I invariably broke out in a cold sweat and lost the ability to speak in complete sentences.

For me, school had been a Darwinian exercise. A daily gauntlet of ridicule, abuse, and isolation. By the time I entered sixth grade, I was beginning to wonder if I’d be able to maintain my sanity until graduation, still six long years away.

Then, one glorious day, our principal announced that any student with a passing grade-point average could apply for a transfer to the new OASIS public school system. The real public school system, the one run by the government, had been an underfunded, overcrowded train wreck for decades. And now the conditions at many schools had gotten so terrible that every kid with half a brain was being encouraged to stay at home and attend school online. I nearly broke my neck sprinting to the school office to submit my application. It was accepted, and I transferred to OASIS Public School #1873 the following semester.

Prior to my transfer, my OASIS avatar had never left Incipio, the planet at the center of Sector One where new avatars were spawned at the time of their creation. There wasn’t much to do on Incipio except chat with other noobs or shop in one of the giant virtual malls that covered the planet. If you wanted to go somewhere more interesting, you had to pay a teleportation fare to get there, and that cost money, something I didn’t have. So my avatar was stranded on Incipio. That is, until my new school e-mailed me a teleportation voucher to cover the cost of my avatar’s transport to Ludus, the planet where all of the OASIS public schools were located.

There were hundreds of school campuses here on Ludus, spread out evenly across the planet’s surface. The schools were all identical, because the same construction code was copied and pasted into a different location whenever a new school was needed. And since the buildings were just pieces of software, their design wasn’t limited by monetary constraints, or even by the laws of physics. So every school was a grand palace of learning,

with polished marble hallways, cathedral-like classrooms, zero-g gymnasiums, and virtual libraries containing every (school board–approved) book ever written.

On my first day at OPS #1873, I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. Now, instead of running a gauntlet of bullies and drug addicts on my walk to school each morning, I went straight to my hideout and stayed there all day. Best of all, in the OASIS, no one could tell that I was fat, that I had acne, or that I wore the same shabby clothes every week. Bullies couldn't pelt me with spitballs, give me atomic wedgies, or pummel me by the bike rack after school. No one could even touch me. In here, I was safe.



When I arrived in my World History classroom, several students were already seated at their desks. Their avatars all sat motionless, with their eyes closed. This was a signal that they were “engaged,” meaning they were currently on phone calls, browsing the Web, or logged into chat rooms. It was poor OASIS etiquette to try to talk to an engaged avatar. They usually just ignored you, and you'd get an automated message telling you to piss off.

I took a seat at my desk and tapped the Engage icon at the edge of my display. My own avatar's eyes slid shut, but I could still see my surroundings. I tapped another icon, and a large two-dimensional Web browser window appeared, suspended in space directly in front of me. Windows like this one were visible to only my avatar, so no one could read over my shoulder (unless I selected the option to allow it).

My homepage was set to the Hatchery, one of the more popular gunter message forums. The Hatchery's site interface was designed to look and operate like an old pre-Internet dial-up bulletin board system, complete with the screech of a 300-baud modem during the log-in sequence. Very cool. I spent a few minutes scanning the most recent message threads, taking in the latest gunter news and rumors. I rarely posted anything to the boards, even though I made sure to check them every day. I didn't see much of interest this morning. The usual gunter clan flame wars. Ongoing arguments about the “correct” interpretation of some cryptic passage in *Anorak's Almanac*. High-level avatars bragging about some new magic item or artifact they'd obtained. This crap had been going on for years now. In the absence of any real progress, gunter subculture had become mired in bravado, bullshit, and pointless infighting. It was sad, really.

My favorite message threads were those devoted to bashing the Sixers. “Sixers” was the derogatory nickname gunters had given to employees of Innovative Online Industries. IOI (pronounced *eye-oh-eye*) was a global communications conglomerate and the world’s largest Internet service provider. A large portion of IOI’s business centered around providing access to the OASIS and on selling goods and services inside it. For this reason, IOI had attempted several hostile takeovers of Gregarious Simulation Systems, all of which had failed. Now they were trying to seize control of GSS by exploiting a loophole in Halliday’s will.

IOI had created a new department within the company that they called their “Oology Division.” (“Oology” was originally defined as “the science of studying birds’ eggs,” but in recent years it had taken on a second meaning: the “science” of searching for Halliday’s Easter egg.) IOI’s Oology Division had but one purpose: to win Halliday’s contest and seize control of his fortune, his company, and the OASIS itself.

Like most gunters, I was horrified at the thought of IOI taking control of the OASIS. The company’s PR machine had made its intentions crystal clear. IOI believed that Halliday never properly monetized his creation, and they wanted to remedy that. They would start charging a monthly fee for access to the simulation. They would plaster advertisements on every visible surface. User anonymity and free speech would become things of the past. 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.

IOI required its egg hunters, which it referred to as “oologists,” to use their employee numbers as their OASIS avatar names. These numbers were all six digits in length, and they also began with the numeral “6,” so everyone began calling them the *Sixers*. These days, most gunters referred to them as “the Sux0rz.” (Because they sucked.)

To become a Sixer, you had to sign a contract stipulating, among other things, that if you found Halliday’s egg, the prize would become the sole property of your employer. In return, IOI gave you a bimonthly paycheck, food, lodging, health-care benefits, and a retirement plan. The company also provided your avatar with high-end armor, vehicles, and weapons, and covered all of your teleportation fares. Joining the Sixers was a lot like joining the military.

Sixers weren’t hard to spot, because they all looked identical. They were all required to use the same hulking male avatar (regardless of the opera-

tor's true gender), with close-cropped dark hair and facial features left at the system default settings. And they all wore the same navy blue uniform. The only way to tell these corporate drones apart was by checking the six-digit employee number stamped on their right breast, just beneath the IOI corporate logo.

Like most gunters, I loathed the Sixers and was disgusted by their very existence. By hiring an army of contract egg hunters, IOI was perverting the entire spirit of the contest. Of course, it could be argued that all the gunters who had joined clans were doing the same thing. There were now hundreds of gunter clans, some with thousands of members, all working together to find the egg. Each clan was bound by an ironclad legal agreement stating that if one clan member won the contest, all members would share the prize. Solos like me didn't care much for the clans, either, but we still respected them as fellow gunters—unlike the Sixers, whose goal was to hand the OASIS over to an evil multinational conglomerate intent on ruining it.

My generation had never known a world without the OASIS. To us, it was much more than a game or an entertainment platform. It had been an integral part of our lives for as far back as we could remember. We'd been born into an ugly world, and the OASIS was our one happy refuge. The thought of the simulation being privatized and homogenized by IOI horrified us in a way that those born before its introduction found difficult to understand. For us, it was like someone threatening to take away the sun, or charge a fee to look up at the sky.

The Sixers gave gunters a common enemy, and Sixer bashing was a favorite pastime in our forums and chat rooms. A lot of high-level gunters had a strict policy of killing (or trying to kill) every Sixer who crossed their path. Several websites were devoted to tracking Sixer activities and movements, and some gunters spent more time hunting the Sixers than they did searching for the egg. The bigger clans actually held a yearly competition called "Eighty-Six the Sux0rz," with a prize for the clan who managed to kill the largest number of them.

After checking a few other gunter forums, I tapped a bookmark icon for one of my favorite websites, Arty's Missives, the blog of a female gunter named Art3mis (pronounced "Artemis"). I'd discovered it about three years ago and had been a loyal reader ever since. She posted these great rambling essays about her search for Halliday's egg, which she called

a “maddening MacGuffin hunt.” She wrote with an endearing, intelligent voice, and her entries were filled with self-deprecating humor and witty, sardonic asides. In addition to posting her (often hysterical) interpretations of passages in the *Almanac*, she also linked to the books, movies, TV shows, and music she was currently studying as part of her Halliday research. I assumed that all of these posts were filled with misdirection and misinformation, but they were still highly entertaining.

It probably goes without saying that I had a massive cyber-crush on Art3mis.

She occasionally posted screenshots of her raven-haired avatar, and I sometimes (always) saved them to a folder on my hard drive. Her avatar had a pretty face, but it wasn’t unnaturally perfect. In the OASIS, you got used to seeing freakishly beautiful faces on everyone. But Art3mis’s features didn’t look as though they’d been selected from a beauty drop-down menu on some avatar creation template. Her face had the distinctive look of a real person’s, as if her true features had been scanned in and mapped onto her avatar. Big hazel eyes, rounded cheekbones, a pointy chin, and a perpetual smirk. I found her unbearably attractive.

Art3mis’s body was also somewhat unusual. In the OASIS, you usually saw one of two body shapes on female avatars: the absurdly thin yet wildly popular supermodel frame, or the top-heavy, wasp-waisted porn starlet physique (which looked even less natural in the OASIS than it did in the real world). But Art3mis’s frame was short and Rubenesque. All curves.

I knew the crush I had on Art3mis was both silly and ill-advised. What did I really know about her? She’d never revealed her true identity, of course. Or her age or location in the real world. There was no telling what she really looked like. She could be fifteen or fifty. A lot of gunters even questioned whether she was really female, but I wasn’t one of them. Probably because I couldn’t bear the idea that the girl with whom I was virtually smitten might actually be some middle-aged dude named Chuck, with back hair and male-pattern baldness.

In the years since I’d first started reading Arty’s Missives, it had become one of the most popular blogs on the Internet, now logging several million hits a day. And Art3mis was now something of a celebrity, at least in gunter circles. But fame hadn’t gone to her head. Her writing was still as funny and self-deprecating as ever. Her newest blog post was titled “The John Hughes Blues,” and it was an in-depth treatise on her six favor-

ite John Hughes teen movies, which she divided into two separate trilogies: The “Dorky Girl Fantasies” trilogy (*Sixteen Candles*, *Pretty in Pink*, and *Some Kind of Wonderful*) and the “Dorky Boy Fantasies” trilogy (*The Breakfast Club*, *Weird Science*, and *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*).

Just as I’d finished reading it, an instant message window popped up on my display. It was my best friend, Aech. (OK, if you want to split hairs, he was my only friend, not counting Mrs. Gilmore.)

Aech: Top o’ the morning, amigo.

Parzival: Hola, compadre.

Aech: What are you up to?

Parzival: Just surfing the turf. You?

Aech: Got the Basement online. Come and hang out before school, fool.

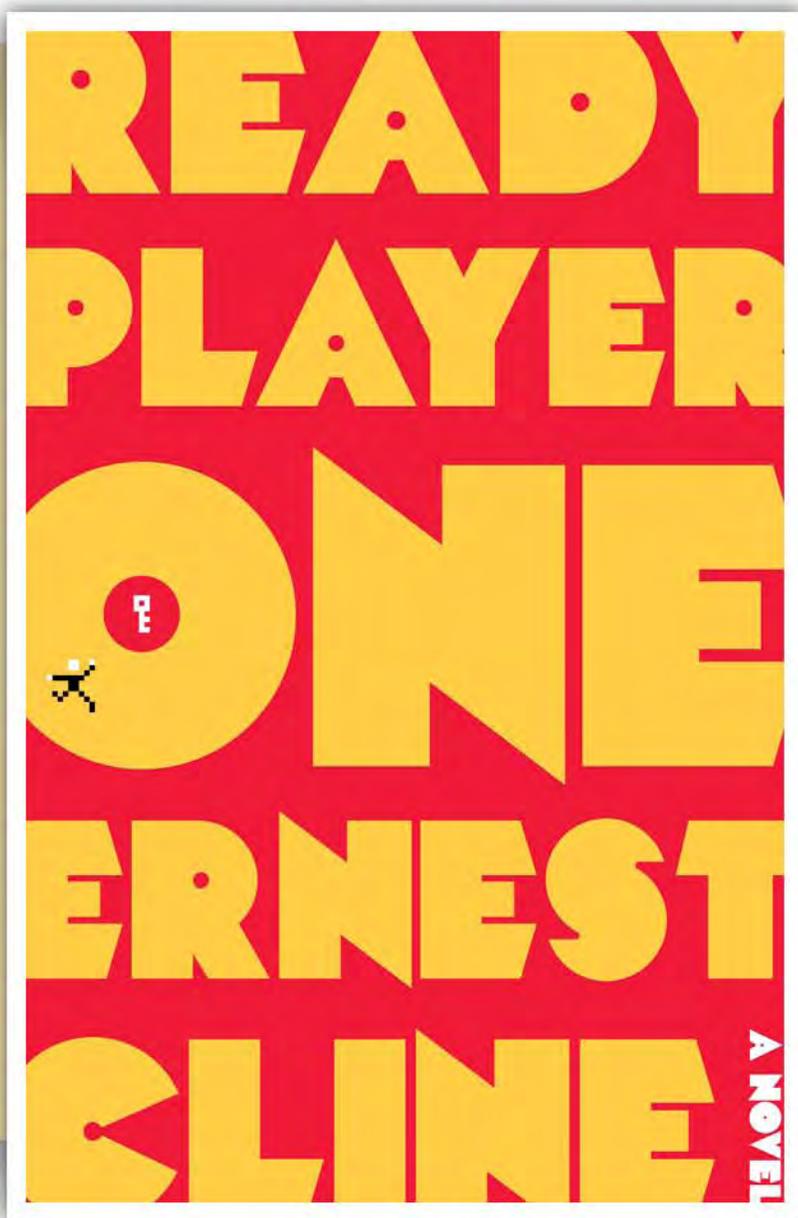
Parzival: Sweet! I’ll be there in a sec.

I closed the IM window and checked the time. I still had about half an hour until class started. I grinned and tapped a small door icon at the edge of my display, then selected Aech’s chat room from my list of favorites.

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