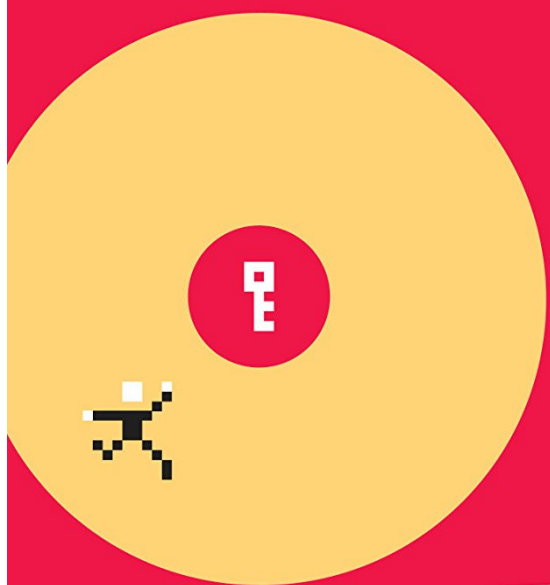


READY PLAYER ONE ERNEST CLINE

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#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

A NOVEL

More Advance Praise for *Ready Player One*

“[An] adrenaline shot of uncut geekdom ... sweet, self-deprecating Wade, whose universe is an odd mix of the real past and the virtual present, is the perfect lovable/unlikely hero.”

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“The pure, unfettered brainscream of a child of the ’80s, like a dream my thirteen-year-old self would have had after bingeing on Pop Rocks and Coke.... I couldn’t put it down.”

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“Pure geek heaven. Ernest Cline’s hero competes in a virtual world with life-and-death stakes—which is only fitting, because he’s fighting to make his dreams into reality. Cline blends a dystopic future with meticulously detailed nostalgia to create a story that will resonate in the heart of every true nerd.”

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romp through some of the best memories of my youth.”

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“Imagine that Dungeons and Dragons and an ’80s video arcade made hot, sweet love, and their child was raised in Azeroth. If you’re not already experiencing a nerdgasm at the thought, I don’t want to know you.”

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“*Ready Player One* expertly mines a copious vein of 1980s pop culture, catapulting the reader on a light-speed adventure in an advanced but backward-looking future. **If this book were a living room, it would be wood-paneled. If it were shoes, it would be high-tops. And if it were a song, well, it would have to be ‘Eye of the Tiger.’** I really, really loved it.”

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“I was blown away by this book.... **Ernie Cline has pulled the raddest of all magic tricks: He’s managed to write a novel that’s at once serious and playful, that is as fun to read as it is harrowing.** A book of ideas, a potboiler, a game-within-a-novel, a serious science-fiction epic, a comic pop-culture mash-up—call this novel what you will, but *Ready Player One* will defy every label you try to put on it. **Here, finally, is this generation’s *Neuromancer*.**”

—Will Lavender, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Obedience*

Ready Player One

Ernest Cline



Crown Publishers
New York

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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For Susan and Libby
Because there is no map for where we are going

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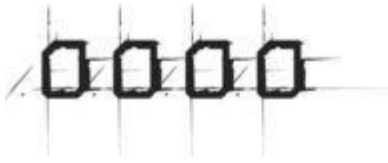
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Everyone my age remembers where they were and what they were doing when they first heard about the contest. I was sitting in my hideout watching cartoons when the news bulletin broke in on my video feed, announcing that James Halliday had died during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

“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 contemporary 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.

* 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.

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

* 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.

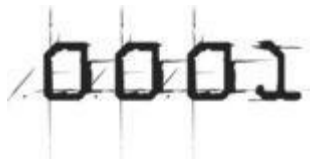
† A freeze-frame of this scene appears nearly identical to a painting by Jeff Easley that appeared on the cover of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*, a Dungeons & Dragons rulebook published in 1983.

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 middleclass 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