

The Transtextuality of Cline's *Ready Player One*

A Comparative Analysis into the Effect of Transtextuality, and the Subsequent Emancipation of its Reader.

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Abstract

This analysis looks into the history behind the concept of *transtextuality* as articulated by Genette, and its implications to the notion of there being *a correct way to read*. Arguably, Barthes' *Death of the Author* gave increased agency on behalf of the reader, but this came at the detriment of authorial intent. Transtextuality often contain *significance*, which has the potential to destroy any notion of *fixed meaning* in any given text. In light if this, the following analysis investigated the *plural ways* in which Cline's novel can be said to contain meaning. This analysis does not attempt to be exhaustive, and merely aims at demonstrating the ramifications of transtextuality in light of the relational aspect of language and culture, and especially in light of the increased agency on behalf of a reader that came at the detriment of authorial intent.

Keywords: Kristeva; Genette; Barthes; Transtextuality; Reader; Significance; Cyberpunk; Monomyth; '80's pop culture.

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Chapter One

1.1 Introduction:

In 2011, Ernest Cline made his authorial debut with his novel *Ready Player One*. Cline's novel borrow heavily from the world of gaming and other pieces of culture, and he has stated on numerous occasions the novel was inspired by two specific pieces of culture, namely *Charlie and the Chocolate factory* and the Atari game *Adventure*. According to Cline, the idea of an eccentric rich man without any heirs giving away his fortune, and the concept of *easter eggs* from the world of gaming served as the main inspiration for his story. In addition to the inspiration Cline drew from those two cultural items, his novel appear to contain an abundance of *transtextual elements*, most of which appear to have their roots in the 1980's. This is somewhat evident in the way the novel constantly refers back to 1980's pop culture by referencing and repurposing pieces of '80's popular culture. Cline has stated that he only added those transtextual references that naturally came to mind while writing the story, which means that in spite of being a novel that thrives within the realm of transtextuality Cline did not write this novel as a way of making these references. On the contrary, if Cline's statement is true, that would mean the transtextuality Cline's novel displays was a prerequisite for Cline to be able to write *Ready Player One*. This thesis will attempt to locate and identify some of these transtextual references, and to investigate their inter-relationship, and their effect on overarching narrative of *Ready Player One*. By doing this, the goal of this thesis is to unravel the notion of transtextuality utilised by Cline in an attempt to describe how it can function as an extra layer of communication between author, text, and reader.

Transtextuality can have a disconcerting effect on the concept of *meaning*, and an alienating effect on readers who are not familiar with the references. This might be because *meaning* is *relative*, and it is the reader of the text who project meaning, or *significance* to the text (s)he is engaging with. The relational aspect of meaning in relation to the reader's own preexisting knowledge regarding the culture Cline might be repurposing in his novel, arguably, enables a plethora of *correct* ways to interpret Cline's text. This idea will be tested, and demonstrated by performing both *open-* and *closed structuralist analysis* of *Ready Player One* in relation to *The Morphology of the Folktale* by Vladimir Propp, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* by Joseph Campbell, Julia Kristeva's notion of *significance*, and in relation to the sci-fi subgenera of *cyberpunk*.

The following thesis will be divided into five chapters. Chapter one consists of an introduction to the concept of transtextuality, a brief history behind the term, a terminology section, an overview of the effects of transtextuality and modernity, and explain the research method used for this thesis. Chapter two explains how a formalistic approach to transtextuality, along with a closed-structuralist analysis, enables *one* interpretation of transtextuality in relation to Cline's novel. Chapter three contains an open-structuralist analysis, and explains how this would enable an *alternative* interpretation of the effects of transtextuality within Cline's novel. Chapter four contain three separate open-structuralist analysis, which are not meant to be exhaustive but merely aims at demonstrating how one open-structuralist analysis can never hope to be exhaustive due to the plurality of potential meanings. The open-structural analysis in this research paper will focus on analysing *Ready Player One* in relation to sci-fi subgenera *cyberpunk*, Julia Kristeva's notion of *significance*, and Joseph Campbell's idea of the *monomyth*. Chapter five summaries the problem of transtextuality, before discussing the effects of transtextuality within *Ready Player One*. Finally, this thesis will end in an attempting to reach some sort of conclusion regarding the external world Cline is, arguably, repurposing for reasons of pastiche.

In order to understand transtextuality it is important to understand the history behind the term and to clarify exactly what it means. The following section will include a brief introduction of the history of the meaning behind the term transtextuality. Since the term *meaning* is contested, this section will focus on discussing transtextuality as it will be used in this thesis. Consequently, this section will not attempt to be comprehensive but rather aim towards offering a roadmap to the notions of transtextuality utilised by Cline as analysed in this thesis.

1.2 History:

Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure is credited for being the first to divide *the sign* into two parts, namely the *signified* and the *signifier*; the *signified* represents the *concept* while the *signifier* is regarded as the *sound-image*. According to Saussure, meaning is derived from the intersection of these two parts, which is significant because it shows that: "Signs are arbitrary, possessing meaning not because of a referential function but because of their function within a linguistic system as it exists at any one moment in time" (Allen 9). This observation by Saussure is critical in understanding one of the fundamental principles within the concept of transtextuality because it showed that *the sign* is non-referential, which means that its meaning does not only stem from the sign itself but from the sign's placement within a larger system. This system is dynamic as opposed to static, which means that it changes over time and through social constructions. This in

turn implies that transtextuality contains social elements in addition to its linguistic ones. It is here the work of Russian literary theorist M. M. Bakhtin and his writings on the concepts of *dialogism* and *heteroglossia* comes in.

Dialogism refers to the inherent referential nature of communication, for which Bakhtin argued that all acts of communication, written or other, exist in a perpetual dialog with former acts of communication. *Heteroglossia* was Bakhtin's term for the differentiated modes of discourse society layers onto communicative acts, examples of which are numerous; suffice to say, vernacular, vocabulary, dialects, etc., all play a part in acts of communication, to the point where what is negated from a communicative act can also be analysed as part of the mode of discourse (Allen 14-19). If the Bakhtinian aspect of dialogism is important in understanding the referential nature of transtextuality, heteroglossia is crucial for understanding the aspect of culture and social status within the realm of transtextuality; heteroglossia can be described as the social perspective from which one sees the world, and this perspective perpetuates the system which the social aspect of transtextuality stems from.

Julia Kristeva first coined the term *intertextuality* when she during the 1960's set out to unify and elaborate upon the theoretical work of Bakhtin and Saussure. Saussureian semiology and Bakhtinian dialogism and heteroglossia became merged and re-articulated in a way that, for Kristeva, replaced the preexisting notion of intersubjectivity; this is because meaning is not so much *exchanged* as it is *decoded* (Allen 41-52). According to Kristeva, *poetic language*, her term for language that express the duality often associated with transtextual discourse, contain *significance* - a way of representing and communicating that which is not present in the text (Allen 34). Kristeva's take on Bakhtin's work show that the referential nature of language automatically subsume that the word or utterance is in fact double-voices - possessing a meaning (A1) at the same time as it possesses another meaning (not A1). This can be illustrated by using the word *healthy* - someone who is healthy is well and not suffering from any illness. Based on this, the word healthy has two relational meaning, namely *someone who is well* (A1) and *someone who is not sick* (B1). The relationship between linguistics and relational meanings is well articulated within some of the work by Roland Barthes and Gérard Genette. Furthermore, they both serve as prime examples because they focus on two different aspects of transtextuality in relation to critical analysis.

In 1967, Roland Barthes published his highly influential essay *The Death Of The Author* which arguably can be said to have given birth to the concept of *the reader*, which it accomplished at the detriment of *authorial intent*. By arguing for increased agency on behalf of the reader, Barthes was able to successfully argue the importance of the preexisting notions and ideas a reader brings

with them when engaging with a text. As a consequence, Barthes' essay enabled a shift in emphasis from that of the long-standing idea of *authorial intent* towards the more contemporary idea of *reader participation*. Due to the important nature of allusions within the realm of intertextuality, reader-participation becomes a crucial element in decoding transtextual references. Additionally, this theory of transtextuality dictates that texts lack independent meaning, i.e., all texts are transtextual, and thus one must trace the transtextual relations within a text in order to properly interpret the text. Based on this, logically all texts contain at least two relational meanings depending on whether or not one views a text in isolation or in relation to all other texts; the latter of which is actually a basic element of linguistics. Reading can therefore be said to be a process of *moving between texts*, or as I prefer, to navigate an ocean of possible meanings and transtextuality. Barthes asserts that there are two types of readers, namely *consumers* and *readers*, where the latter also becomes a sort of *writer*. This observation by Barthes differs from the long standing tradition of formalism which focused on analysing texts in a way that would sequence its meaning so that it would conform to a monotheistic reading. Monotheistic in this context is related to a notion of *absolute truth/meaning*, which would imply that there is a *correct* way to interpret a text. However, as the theories of transtextuality along with the relational aspect of language demonstrates, such a reading could never hope to be comprehensive due to the *plurality of ways* any given text can be read in relation to itself or in relation to culture as a whole.

A good example of this type of formalistic approach can be seen in Russian folklorist and scholar Vladimir Propp's investigation of the morphological composition of folktales. Propp argued that one of the first steps in a scientific investigation is correct classification (7). He further insisted that such a classification should be based on *structure*. Building on this premise, Propp constructed the *Morphology of the Folktale* (1968). By analysing the narrative of one hundred folktales, Propp came up with a recipe for the folktale. According to Propp, all fairytales follow the same narrative; elements may be omitted or expanded upon, but the sequence of events is always the same. The problem with Propp's morphological dissection of the Russian folktale is that he made no attempt to unify his morphology with Russian culture as a whole, as pointed out by Alan Dundes in the introduction to the second edition of Propp's *Morphology*. Dundes is arguably merely pointing out the closed-structuralist effect of Propp's approach. Dundes does, however, also point out that the type of tales Propp investigates in his *Morphology* conform to what is termed *Aarne-Thompson tale types*, and those tales are not geographically limited to the former Soviet Union.

By doing this, Dundes illustrates the two main problem with Propp's morphology: Firstly, Propp assumed that "fairy tales" existed as a special class of stories as an *essential working*

hypothesis, and secondly, the morphology Propp comprised was supposed to describe “the tale according to its components parts and the relationship of these components to each other and to the *whole*” (19, my emphasis). Dundes claims that form, i.e., the morphology of the folktale, “must ultimately be related to the culture or cultures in which it is found” (xiii), which Propp fails to do, and thus illustrates the problem with closed-structuralism. Paradoxically, I would argue that Propp’s morphology does exactly what Barthes is advocating for; Propp became a *reader* of the folktale, and thus also a *writer*. Propp, by way of his morphology, thus illustrates the the difference between Barthes’ consumer and reader rather nicely.

Due to the plurality of potential meanings in a text, most contemporary critics have move away from a strictly formalistic approach to literary analysis. This is because our contemporary view of the notions of transtextuality would dictate that textual analysis is in fact pluralist, a sentiment captured by Barthes in 1981 with the following statement: “There are no more critics, only writers” (*Theory of the Text*). The concept of transtextuality and Barthes’ idea of differentiating between *consumers* and *readers* disrupts any *monotheistic meaning* and thus also any *monotheistic reading*. Transtextuality would not be so *disruptive* to textual analysis if one insisted that the text existed in a realm of its own. However, by exploring the notion that multiple realms might exist at the same time and that, more often than not, these realms influence each other would introduce what Barthes termed the “evil of plurality” (Barthes 160). This can be interpreted to mean that due to the relational nature of all texts, transtextuality is inherently subjective. The reason for this is the direct correlation between the reader and their subjective *memory* or *knowledge base*, of which the social aspect should not be ignored. As a consequence, all textual analysis are rooted in a subjective interpretation directly linked to the memory or knowledge base of its reader. This interpretation is echoed by Allen who wrote: “For Barthes, literary meaning can never be fully stabilised by the reader, since the literary work’s intertextual nature always leads the reader on to new textual relations” (Allen 3). In addition, structuralist analysis of literature has shown how the *codes of society* modify and influence literature. If one were to look at the lack of prolific female writers thought-out the eighteen-century without taking into consideration the way society often has undermined the authorship of women, one fails to see the correlation between literature and the codes of society, and one need only look at the lack of female authors belonging to the Western literary canon to see this point.

In 1979, Barthes articulated that texts “blend and clash,” by which he was referring to the “multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original” are regurgitated by the author, which make the text appear as a “tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable

centres of culture” (Barthes 146). This is arguably the notion that Barthes was referring to when he a decade earlier in his 1967 essay, *The Death of the Author*, argued that “the unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination” (6). This means that one of the fundamental principles of transtextuality would suggest that there is never a single or correct way to interpret a text since every reader brings with them a set of expectations, interests, viewpoints, reading experiences, and varying degrees of cultural exposure that they, willingly or subconsciously, project onto the text. Consequently, Propp’s *Morphology* should be read in light of this fundamental principle of transtextuality, which should then be enough to raise doubt about the impact of morphology in the unsuspecting reader. Logic would dictate that an unsuspecting reader, one without previous knowledge regarding Propp and the *Morphology of the Folktale*, would not recognise, and thereby not read, any text in relation to such a *Morphology* if (s)he was not aware of the existence of such a system when first engaging with the text.

1.3 Terminology:

Perhaps most importantly for a post-structuralist reading is the fact that meaning is relational and that this is unavoidable due to the inherently differential aspect of languages. Keep in mind that differential aspect of languages is related to the system, not the world, and that this system is rooted in culture. Genette deployed the terms *doxa* and *para-doxa* to illustrate how the system is rooted in culture. *Doxa* is equivalent to what Michel Foucault termed *episteme*, i.e., the prevailing world view at any one point in time, while the *para-doxa* represents an alternative view. Genette then elaborated on this unavoidable relational aspect of *reading* by admitting that his theories could be considered paradoxical at the time of their conception, however with time his theories might become accepted by the mainstream which would then make them *doxa* and no longer paradoxical. This led to Genette’s articulation of *open-structuralism* which acknowledges that no individual reading of any text can hope to be exhaustive since every text can be read by itself or in relation to other texts. This open-structuralism should be seen as opposed to Propp and *closed-structuralism*, which concerns itself with deciphering the inner structures of a text as these structures appear with the text itself.

Genette coined the term *transtextuality*, where the prefix stems from the word *transcendent*. He elaborated on this term and came up with five categories that fall under it, namely *intertextuality*, *paratextuality*, *metatextuality*, *hypertextuality*, and *architextuality*. Since I feel that Genette offered the most comprehensive and descriptive definition of his terminology I have decided to stay faithful to his terms and their definitions. That is the reason why the term

transtextuality has been favoured over the more commonly used but arguably less defined *intertextuality* as articulated by Kristeva.

Genette defines intertextuality as “the presence of one text inside another” through the use of quotations, allusions and/or plagiarism. Paratextuality consist of the elements that mark the text, and “directs and controls the reception of a text by its reader”. These elements as further subdivided into two groups: Elements such as the title, chapter titles, preface and notes are termed *peritext*, and interviews, announcements, reviews, private letters, and other authorial and/or editorial announcements are termed *epitext*. Metatextuality is when a text is united with another text without necessarily naming or citing it. Literary criticism can be one example of this. Hypertextuality has to be the most important term within Genette’s transtextual subcategories, and that is because hypertextuality is what many call *inter-text*, and that is when a text invokes another text in a way that is not meant to be commentary. The presence of such a text within another text is called *hypotext*, and this is arguably what many others call intertextuality. Architextuality is the last category, and it consists of elements such as genre, type of discourse and modes of enunciation (Allen 97-105).

Genette’s subcategories of transtextuality appear to share the desire of semiology and structuralism to study the life of the cultural sign-system while *emphasising their systematic and relational nature*, and it is this ability to *constitute a system* that is the characteristic of any set of signs, be it linguistic or cultural (Allen 92-3). Works of literature might try to hide their relation to the system, supposedly by appearing to be unique, but for Allen, “the function of criticism” is to combat this by “rearranging the work *back into its relation to the closed literary system*” (Allen 93, His italics). It is these systems, *not* the individual work, that is the main object of interest for structuralist poetics, or as Genette would phrase it; the subject of poetics is not the text in its singularity, but the architext (Genette 1). Based on these claims by Allen and Genette, one could argue that the function of literary criticism is not to evaluate a text in its singularity but to investigate how the text relates to the literary system as a whole. This is very similar to Propp’s definition of his morphology; i.e., “a description of the tale according to its component parts and the relationship of these components to each other and to the whole” (19). It is important to note however that this rearrangement of the sign-system will probably not be identical to the structure as it was originally comprised, yet it functions as both a description and an explanation of the original structure by the very act of rearrangement (Allen 93).

For Genette, a single text is the result of an entire set of general or transcendent categories, including literary genres, modes of enunciation and the reader’s own knowledge of the hypotexts

that the hypertext would transform for the purpose of pastiche or satire (Allen 105). This leads us to Genette's definition of *textual transcendence*, which is: "All that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts" (Genette 1). This separates Genette's transtextuality from less defined notions of *intertextuality* and combines the focus from Saussurean linguistics, i.e., the relational nature of meaning, with a socio-political aspect, by reflecting on human relations and society as a whole. It is the way Genette tries to unify these two aspects which differentiate his notion of textual transcendence from that of earlier structuralists whose approach to transtextuality attempted to disrupt any notion of fixed meaning (Allen 4), and that is the reason why this researcher prefer Genette's articulation of textual transcendence, i.e., *transtextuality*, over less defined *intertextuality* as an umbrella term.

1.4 Modernity:

Transtextuality and its application within the non-literary arts has led to the current cultural epoch becoming oversaturated with transtextuality, and the advent of modern computer technology has led to a web of transtextuality that, according to American literary critic Harold Bloom, has become so dense that it becomes almost impossible to extract any meaning (Charlie Rose Interview). In light of the aforementioned theorists, the term *text* has been transformed to the extent that German game researcher Julian Kücklich argues that the meaning of the word can be now be said to encompass and signify any and all cultural objects. "Thus, art, music and architecture, but also cities, fashion and rituals can be regarded as texts that can be read and interpreted" (Kücklich 96). I take this to mean that all elements of human culture have the opportunity to appear as hypotexts within each other. This is because all elements of human culture exist in relation to a system, and by existing, these elements influence and comment on the system as a whole. This is arguably what Bakhtin was referring to with his dialogism; elements of human culture are able to comment and influence each other by expanding the system from which they stem, and by existing in *perpetual dialogue* with both the system and all of its constituents. As for *Ready Player One*, the effect of such a *dialogue* has, arguably, *modified* Cline's original story. This will be illustrated by reflecting on the effect of *fan-fiction* and its potential implications by reading Cline's novel in relation to the canonised piece of *Ready Player One fan-fiction, Lacero*, written by Andy Weir. In light of this, all elements of human culture can, and should, be viewed in light of its constitute parts, i.e., *the system*. The referential nature of the system explains Bloom's statement about *the web becoming so dense that extracting meaning becomes difficult*, but I do not agree that it is

impossible. After all, literary texts can, and I believe should, be considered as “cultural products with deep roots in the culture they stem from (Kücklich, 104). By tracing the roots, it should be possible to place the products back into the system that produced them, or at least to chart their lineage within the textual universe they inhabit.

The analysis that follows this chapter will locate and identify transtextual elements within Cline’s *Ready Player One*, while paying extra close attention to the presence of hypotexts. The relationship between these hypotexts will be discussed, and they will be analysed as constituent parts of a *hybrid medium*, i.e.; a medium which combine different traditions and technologies (Kücklich, 95). This hybrid medium constitutes what I would term a *sign of its time*, and it is here the cultural sphere of a literary work’s conception plays a crucial role. By analysing Cline’s novel in relation to the system from which it emerged we should be able to pinpoint the narrative environment of the story. It is, arguably, this environment that Cline is repurposing in order to *comment, critique, or expand* on a preexisting cultural environment, which is why tracing these narrative elements within a text is important in order to understand *how* any given text relates to other texts and cultural phenomena.

There is no way to ignore the fact that *Ready Player One* is a novel that draws *heavily* from the world of gaming, and the novel itself can be said to be a clash of literature and gaming. An argument for this can be found in the epitext to *Ready Player One*, when the publisher along with the author incorporated an *easter-egg* contest *within the novel* for the paperback release of *Ready Player One* in 2012. According to Kücklich, as researchers, it is well within our right to question genre classification (102), and since the way one chooses to read is likely to change the reading experience, the best way to extract meaning from the novel will be to investigate the external components within the text, aka, the different types of transtextuality and especially hypotexts to see if there is a dominant aspect within the text that would privilege one interpretation over another (Kücklich 104).

Kücklich claims that it is often useful to think about the texts that a game “quotes from, alludes to or hints at because this will reveal a lot about the kind of players the game is targeted towards” (106). Logically the same can be said about works of literature, which means that this paper is written under the presumption that novel’s transtextuality can tell us something about the author’s intended reader. In addition to this, the novel’s transtextual components should be able to shed some light on the culture in which the novel was written. This is because the novel’s transtextual components refer to an overarching cultural system, and the novel along with its author exist in relation to this system.

1.5 Research method:

According to Propp, one of the first step in a scientific analysis is correct classification (5). This will be achieved by investigating the morphological composition of the novel. Propp argues that “tales with identical function can be considered as belonging to one type” (22), and that these functions should be based on structural features, not thematic ones. After correctly having classified the novel based on its structural features, the second step will be a close reading that will be undertaken by the researcher with the aim of identifying transtextual references in Cline’s novel. Since decoding transtextual elements can be considered an inherently individualistic experience due to the fact that they are so closely linked with a person’s own memories and previous knowledge, the most natural way to locate transtextuality in a text would be by performing a close reading of the text. This does, however, limit the transtextual references studied to those corresponding the researcher’s own personal experiences, and in order to compensate for the subjectivity of the selection, this thesis will compare my own corpus of transtextual references with the established reference lists made by Cline and four other secondary sources.

By focusing on a selection of transtextual elements, and triangulating these with the references confirmed by Cline, and other lists of transtextual elements compiled by other readers, I hope to be able to identify the *core* of transtextual elements Cline is arguably repurposing and utilising for reasons of pastiche. The result will be a demonstrative overview of the transtextual references organised into by their respective categories according to Genette’s model of transtextuality. There are several different ways one could compile such data, and the method used to compile the data could then presumably affect the findings. The purpose of doing this, however, is to use it in an attempt to infer something about the kind of transtextual elements Cline is invoking by use of transtextuality. The goal is to trace the transtextual elements back into their placement within an overarching system, namely, the *culture*. By doing this, we should be able to infer something about the extra layers of communication that are present in Cline’s text for the *right* reader, or what Barthes’ termed *writer*.

Since it is a well known fact that cultures often *clash*, the result of a successful analysis within the realm of transtextuality should diverge based on how it is viewed. This divergence will, arguably, demonstrate how transtextuality destroys the concept of monotheism within literature, i.e., how a text can be read *correctly* in a *variety* of different ways. Additionally, the narrative purposes of transtextuality within *Ready Player One* will be discussed, paying close attention to the role the references play in plot development. It is worth mentioning, however, that a comprehensive analysis of *Ready Player One*, one that was aimed at locating *all* transtextual elements within the novel

should be doomed to fail due to the relational aspect of both language and culture. This is compensated for by assuming that the intertextual references within Cline's novel are all part of a system. By identifying some of the parts and rearranging them back into their respective placement within the system, one should not need to locate *all* references in order to locate the *system* they inhabit (24). Since this is mostly a qualitative study of transtextuality and its impact, any references that would go unnoticed should not interfere with the overall results of this analysis. This is especially true since the focus of this thesis is to show the way transtextuality destroys the idea of a *correct way to read*, and celebrates the plurality of (social)language.

Finally, this thesis will end with a discussion of the role transtextuality plays in Cline's *Ready Player One*, before discussing the disconcerting and alienating effect it may cause readers not familiar with the references. By reflecting on the role of transtextuality and the way it enables extra layers of communication between author, text, and reader this thesis hopes to unravel the notions of transtextuality deployed by Cline. The theories of transtextuality would dictate that there is no fixed meaning within Cline's novel, but by analysing a selection of the transtextual elements of the novel along with its morphological composition, it is my believe that I will be able to draw some conclusions regarding the external world that the novel incorporates onto its pages through the use of transtextuality.

In light of the theories of transtextuality, it should not matter what items of transtextuality are chosen for further analysis since they should all point back towards an overarching system. The purpose of this analysis is not to be comprehensive in terms of locating *all* transtextual elements but to locate *a selection* of transtextual elements within Cline's novel. Arguably, an attempt to be comprehensive would be impossible due to the ever-expanding pieces of *cultural text* Cline is repurposing in his story, but it should not be necessary to be comprehensive in order to demonstrate how transtextuality disrupts the concept of a monotheistic reading. By demonstrating a *plurality of potential meanings* within Cline's novel, any notion of there being a monotheistic way of reading *should* be laid to rest.

Chapter Two

2.1 Formalistic approach:

The way one reads a novel will arguably influence *how* the novel is interpreted. This argument is logical based on the previous mentioned theories of transtextuality, where the reader's own preexisting knowledge, their subjectivity, is crucial in order to recognise allusions and references to the system as a whole. *Ready Player One* can arguably said to conform to systems, rooted in the culture where it was written in addition to the cultures in which it is read. As a consequence, an analysis of transtextuality within *Ready Player One* should contain a minimum of two relational meanings based on whether or not one reads the novel in relation to culture as a whole, or if one choses to read the text in isolation from the cultures that influenced it. This is what Barthes' termed *The Death of the Author*, and this is arguably the idea behind Barthes' attempt to regain agency on behalf of the reader, which came at the detriment of *authorial intent*. This is important because it renders any analysis of *Ready Player One* as *incomplete* if the analysis of transtextuality is performed from a specific point of view.

This argument can be demonstrated by performing a *closed-structuralist analysis* of *Ready Player One*, meaning an analysis that attempts to conform Cline's novel to a monotheistic reading. By showing how the novel can be read in a variety of ways depending on the previous knowledge the reader possesses at the time of the reading, the goal of the following analysis is to show how *meaning* is relative *and* plural, and to explain *how* transtextuality disrupts the idea of an absolute truth, or a correct way to read a novel, or, as Barthes' termed it, the way in which a text calls for the death of its author in order to provide meaning for its reader.

A relatively straight forward structuralist analysis, one performed with Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* in mind, will arguably enable a reader to interpret *Ready Player One* as a *folktale*, albeit one with a modern twist. According to the following structuralist analysis of Cline's novel, the findings would seem to suggest that Cline's novel does in fact conform to Propp's morphology of the *victimised hero*, but such a reading would argue that Cline is *modifying* Propp's *Morphology* by repeating steps 15-20 twice, one time in the real world and a second time inside the OASIS. To illustrate the presence of Propp's morphology within Cline's novel, and thus classify *Ready Player One* as a modern folktale based on its structural features, an analysis of the morphology of Cline's novel in relation to Propp's structure of the folktale is necessary to show how meaning, and therefor also truth, are *relative terms*. This claim is supported by the theories of transtextuality which dictate

that *meaning* is directly related to *previous knowledge*, which increases agency on behalf of the readers, and consequently dismiss the notion of *meaning* of something more than an individual experience. By demonstrating the correlation between Propp's *Morphology* and Cline's novel by performing a closed-structuralist analysis, the goal is to show how a *closed-structuralist reading* of *Ready Player One* renders a *closed-structuralist analysis*. This goes a long way towards demonstrating *how* the reader's preexisting notions of meaning can influence how a reader reads a text, and how a text can be influenced by a reader's preexisting notions of *meaning* within a text.

One could argue that Propp's morphology, which was written in a different time, and which dealt with a different type of story than Cline's contemporary novel, is outdated, simplistic, and not applicable in a contemporary literary analysis due to its formalistic approach. The problem with such an argument is how it, arguably, ignores the correlation between Propp and Cline's story, and it is this correlation, especially in the mind of the reader, that should be enough to demonstrate a *potential* meaning within *Ready Player One*. Consequently, the following analysis of *Ready Player One* in relation to *The Morphology of the Folktale* is, perhaps, more detailed than necessary to show the correlation between the two texts. The point that is trying to be made, however, is how *easy* it could be to read the *entirety* of Cline's novel in relation to Propp's *Morphology*. This is, arguably, the point Barthes' was attempting to make when he wrote *The Death of the Author*.

I, personally, do not subscribe to the notion that the author of a text must *die* in order to validate the interpretation of the text's reader; the reader, arguably, only needs to be emancipated from the notion that *authorial intent* should matter. Thus, agency on behalf of the *subjective interpretation* of the *reader* carries *more meaning* than notion of *authorial intent*. To further demonstrate this, the goal of this closed-structuralist analysis of *Ready Player One* is to show how Cline's novel *could* be read in its entirety in relation to *The Morphology of the Folktale*.

2.2 Closed-Structuralist Analysis:

A formalistic approach to *Ready Player One* along with a morphological analysis results in a structuralist reading that conform to Propp's *Morphology* as follows: The novel begins with explaining the premise of the story, while also placing the narrative in relation to the contemporary world in which it was written by Cline. According to Propp, this initial situation is not a *function* but it is non the less an important morphological element (25), and is most often termed *preface*. This preface has two main functions, it explains the *abstention* of James Halliday while also describing *reality* as a *dystopian mess*. After the preface, Cline's novel appears to conform to the linear morphology of the folktale as described by Propp in his *Morphology of the Folktale* (1968).

The story begins with *level one*, where we are introduced to the protagonist, Wade (Parzival in the OASIS). He is an orphan living with his aunt in a trailer park outside Oklahoma City, OK. According to Propp, the first step in the hero's journey would be *absentation*, meaning that one of the members of a family leaves home. Based on this, along with the timeline of deaths occurring (Wade's father when he was only a few months old, his mother when he was eleven years old, and finally James Halliday when Wade was 13 years old), our story begins with James Halliday absenting himself. According to Propp, an "intensified form of abstention" is represented by death. Arguably, Halliday's role as *creator* of the OASIS has made Halliday a *father figure*, not just to Wade, but to all users of the OASIS. Wade was introduced to the OASIS at a very early age by his mother who used it as a "virtual babysitter," which again would support the inferred *father role* Halliday played in Wade's life.

The second step in the folktale would be an interdiction being addressed, meaning there should be some underlying *warning* that is supposed to be heeded by the protagonist, but which needs to be violated for the sake of story progression. In *Ready Player One*, this interdiction appears to be related to the concept of privacy: "People rarely used their real names online", "anonymity was one of the major perks of the OASIS", "GSS had won the right to keep every OASIS user's identity private in a landmark Supreme Court ruling" (28). Wade is aware of the potential value of privacy, this fact is made obvious when we read; "I knew right away that I'd found something of immeasurable value: privacy" (25). Arguably, the value of *privacy* as the *interdiction* does confirm its relevance as a theme in plot development, but this does not necessarily mean that *privacy* is the major theme of the novel. According to Propp, the interdiction should be addressed directly to the hero, and this occurs through the character of Ogden Morrow, who, after Wade and Art3mis have cleared the First Gate, goes on TV for the first time in almost six years to address Wade directly (117). Arguably the interdiction is addressed directly to the hero when we read:

"Then he looked straight into the camera, and I felt as if he was now speaking directly to me.

'Anyone smart enough to accomplish what they have should know better than to risk everything by talking to the vultures in the media,'" (118).

When given in the form of an advice, Propp terms it as an *interdiction in a weakened form* (26).

As mentioned, the interdiction needs to be violated for the story to progress. In the case of Wade, this violation had already occurred. Arguably, as a consequent of the "Great Recession", the public school system had been an overcrowded, underfunded wreck for years. When Wade was given the chance to enroll in the OASIS public school system instead, he provided them with his personal information, including his real name, address, and social security number (29). He did this

before *the Hunt* had started, and before he knew to hide his identity. Thus, although Morrow's advice is heeded by Wade, it is already too late. This violation of the interdiction was the third step of Propp's *Morphology*, and will lead to the introduction of the *antagonist* of the story.

The antagonist in *Ready Player One* is represented by the character of Nolan Sorrento in a strictly structuralist reading. Wade and Sorrento will have their first meeting after IOI "mailbombs" Wade in order to get his attention. This meeting between Wade and Sorrento will facilitate the fulfilment of Propp's fourth to sixth morphological features in rapid succession.

During this initial meeting, Sorrento appears to assess Wade's state of mind before making him an offer:

"It must be very exciting for you. Probably a little scary, too, huh? Knowing you now possess information that millions of people would be willing to kill for?"

This is arguably step four in Propp's *morphology*, i.e.: "The villain makes an attempt at reconnaissance" (28). Wade will turn down Sorrento's offer *three* times, and it is the third refusal which tie back in with the previously mentioned interdiction and its subsequent violation:

"Actually, we're not quite done here. We have one final proposal for you, Parzival. And I saved the best for last."

"Can't you take a hint? *You can't buy me*. So piss off. Adios, Good. Bye."

"Sit down, Wade."

I froze. Had he just used my real name?

"That's right," Sorrento barked. "We know who you are. Wade Owen Watts. Born August twelfth, 2024. Both parents deceased. And we also know *where* you are" (141).

According to Propp, step five is where the villain receives information about his victim, and for Sorrento, this information is evident in the statement: "*You can't buy me*." Thus, Propp's fourth and fifth morphological functions occurred in the dialogical exchange between Wade and Sorrento, and the information Sorrento wanted to obtain was whether or not Wade *could be bought*. Step six is when the villain "attempts to deceive his victim in order to take possession" (29). This occurred when Sorrento gave Wade his final proposal.

After learning that the IOI has rigged his trailer with explosives, Wade, again, considered giving Sorrento what he wanted, but Wade thought it through, and he could not come up with a single good reason why they would let him live, even if he did help them clear the First Gate (144). With this it becomes apparent that Wade sees through Sorrento's attempt to deceive him, concluding that the IOI will kill him regardless.

Step seven is when "the victim submits to deception and thereby unwittingly helps his enemy" (30). This step should be considered a *preliminary misfortune*, meaning that Wade did not

willingly partake in step, and the whole misfortune of the IOI locating Wade through his school records is a direct result of *ignorance*. As mentioned earlier, Wade signed up for the OASIS public school system *before* he learned the importance of hiding one's identity. Regardless, Wade's mistake led to step eight of Propp's morphology: "The villain causes harm or injury to a member of a family." Propp claims that the first seven steps of the morphology are all just a prelude to this point in the story, this is because it is here "the actual movement of the tale is created," (30).

"You'd kill me? I said. "To win a videogame contest?"

"Don't pretend to be naïve, Wade," Sorrento said. "There are billions of dollars at stake here, along with control of one of the world's most profitable corporations, and of the OASIS itself. This is much more than a videogame contest. It always has been" (144).

Step eight, harm caused by the villain, appears in what Propp would call an *intensified* form, whereby the villain *orders a murder to be committed* (33). At this point on the story, Wade's trailer stack is blown-up by the IOI in an attempt to remove Wade from the leaderboard. Wade, however, was not in the trailer when the bombs went off, he was safe in his hideaway.

"I was pulling my gloves back on then I heard the explosion" (145).

"The stack containing my aunt's trailer had collapsed into a fiery, smoking ruin, along with all of the stacks adjacent to it. There was nothing there now but a massive pile of twisted, flaming metal" (145).

Propp claims that there are two distinct type of heroes, the seeker-hero, and the victimised hero, and that the morphological composition will vary slightly depending on what kind of hero we are dealing with. The seeker-hero is one who sets out on a quest of his own volition on order to save the fate of someone in need of saving. This type of hero should be viewed in in contrast to that of the the victimised-hero, meaning one who is *banned* or *driven out* on a quest related to his or her own fate. (36). Wade's narrative conforms to that of the *victimised hero*. This is obvious since it is made clear that it was the IOI that forced Wade to flee. Support for this claim is also present in Propp's writing. Wade is provided with time to escape the stacks after the bombing since he is presumed dead, and Propp wrote that "the hero condemned to death is secretly freed" conform to the arch of the victimised hero, not the seeker-hero (37-8). Thus, Wade's narrative appear to conform more to that of the victimised-hero than the seeker-hero.

The ninth step enables Wade to begin his journey, which, according to Propp, begins with deciding on a *counteraction*:

"I knew I couldn't stay in the stacks much longer. When the Sixers found out I was still alive, they would come back here looking for me. I needed to get the hell out of Dodge." (147).

Wade meets up with his best friend Aech inside Aech's private chatroom, *the Basement*. After catching him up on the previous events, they decide to arrange a meeting of the *High-Five* in Aech's basement. Propp wrote that the *donor character* will make his first appearance during this ninth step in the hero's journey, and he almost does;

“Just then, a stack of comic books on the other side of the room slid off the end table where they were piled and crashed to the floor, as if something had knocked them over,” (158).

This event caused what Barthes' would term an *enigma*, meaning we will need to return to this point in the story at a later time in order to understand what just occurred, but the event still functions as the first appearance of the donor character, thus confirming it as the ninth step in a strict formalistic reading. It should be mentioned that Morrow had already appeared on TV, but in a structural reading this would not count since he was not *actually* present.

Step ten of Propp's morphology is omitted in *Ready Player One*. This is due to the fact that step ten is reserved for the seeker-hero, while *our* hero is the victimised hero. So, after step nine our story continues with step eleven; “the hero leaves home” (39), and this omission supports a closed-structural reading of *Ready Player One*.

“As soon as the first endorsement payment arrived in my account, I bought a one-way bus ticket to Columbus, Ohio, set to depart at eight the following morning” (163).

After having relocated from Oklahoma to Columbus, the hero will be tested. According to Wade, his first order of business was to create a new identity, namely that of Bryce Lynch. Once he has a new identity and a place to stay, Wade “made a silent vow not to go outside again until I had completed my quest. I would abandon the real world altogether until I found the egg” (166). This actually concludes the first part of this three-part story, which means that part *one* of *Ready Player One* contains the first eleven steps of Propp's morphology, of which step ten was omitted.

Ready Player One, level two, continue to conform to *The Morphology of the Folktale*. Propp's twelfth step: “The hero is tested,” arguably, comes as Wade's discovers that his “ongoing infatuation with Art3mis would undermine my ability to focus.” He had convinced himself “that it was all right to slack off a bit, because no one else seemed to be making any progress in their search for the Jade Key.” Based on this, a formalistic reading of the novel would indicate that the *test* appear as an internal struggle for our protagonist to *focus*:

“I tried to keep my head in the game. Really I did. At least once a day, I would pull up the Quatrain and try once again to decipher its meaning.” [...] “There had to be a simple connection I wasn't making, a sly reference that I still wasn't clever or knowledgeable enough to catch” (176-7).

Propp's thirteenth step dictates that the protagonist “reacts to the actions of the future donor,” (42). When Wade and Art3mis attend Morrow's birthday party, Wade *reacts* to the action (the invitation)

of the *future donor* (Morrow). Additionally, Wade both *answers a greeting* and *saves himself from an attempt on his life*, two morphological subplots of Propp's thirteenth morphological step. This is important because it supports the validity of a closed-structural reading of *Ready Player One*.

However, the two narrative subplots are, arguably, *not* the driving force between step thirteen and fourteen. This is supported by the fact that it is Art3mis, and her "dumping of Wade" that actually expedite the narrative of the novel (187).

"You don't live in the real world, Z. From what you've told me, I don't think you ever have.

You're like me. You live inside this illusion" (186).

Her assessment of Wade appear to be on point: "The hour or so after I woke up was my least favourite part of each day, because I spent it in the real world," (195) Wade admits to himself.

"Over the past few months, I'd come to see my rig for what it was: an elaborate contraption for deceiving my senses, to allow me to live in a world that didn't exist. Each component of my rig was a bar in the cell where I had willingly imprisoned myself," (195).

Art3mis distancing herself from Wade will eventually lead to the "acquisition of a magical agent," step fourteen according to Propp. Wade reaches out to Daito and Shoto in order to complete a quest not related to the *Hunt*. This side-quest is very important because it is here that the hero will acquire the use of a magical agent, namely that of *Hayata's Beta Capsule*. At this point in the story, Art3mis found the Jade Key, and this catapults Wade into action: "Suddenly I wanted to win the contest more than ever," Wade exclaims (211).

"Not just for the money. I wanted to prove myself to Art3mis. And I wanted the Hunt to be over, so that she would talk to me again. So that I could finally meet her in person, see her true face, and try to make sense of how I felt about her" (211).

This made Wade return to *Archaide*, "home to the OASIS's largest classic videogame museum." Wade's ultimate mission here in to *pay tribute* to the *father*. This is the place Wade will come across the replica of Halliday's favourite pizza place, and where Wade will play a *perfect game of Pac-Man*, thus, following in the footsteps of *the father*.

"As I chomped my way through the 255th screen, the song 'Pac-Man Fever' began to blast out of the game room stereo. A smile crept onto my face. I know this had to be a small tip-of-the-hat from Halliday," (223).

Upon completing the *perfect game of Pac-Man*, Wade is given the inconspicuous quarter, which he does not have time to investigate due to the progress made in the *Hunt* for Halliday's egg.

I have reason to believe that the event at *Archaide*, in spite of providing Wade with the artifact was not Propp's fifteenth step in his *Morphology*. The reason for this is the correlation between Wade's excursion at *Archeide* and Joseph Campbell's research into the monomyth, as

articulated in Campbell's *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* and analysed in the open-structuralist analysis that follows this morphology. Thus, function fifteen occur when Aech provides Wade with the information needed to obtain the Jade Key for himself. This happened just *after* Wade left *Archeide*, (224). Step sixteen is *the branding of the hero*, according to Propp. This occur *twice* in *Ready Player One*, and it is not the only morphological element that occur twice; one time to Wade as Parzival, *inside* the OASIS, and one time to Wade as Bryce in *the real world*. The importance of this can not be overstated. Our hero is on a journey of self-discovery and transformation, and in order to transform he must first slay the monster within, before he can slay the monster outside.

In the third level of *Ready Player One* Wade begins his metamorphosis. It was Aech's e-mail that led Wade to the location of the Jade Key in step fifteen; however, Wade was also led to the IOI headquarters to become indentured as Bryce Lynch. Based on this, I have reason to believe the doubling of morphological elements begin as early as step fifteen, and goes all the way to step twenty. This means all Propp's functions fifteen to twenty occur twice, one time in the OASIS, and one time in the real world.

For clarity, we will first focus on the events as they take place in the real world, starting with step fifteen; "the hero is transferred, delivered, or led to the whereabouts of an object of search, (50). Propp's designation for this element is *spacial transference between two kingdoms*, and this is evidently what we experience when the IOI arrest Wade and transfer him to IOI headquarters. There, step sixteen is fulfilled; the hero is branded by the "eargear" that he is tagged with. Once settled, the hero will do battle with the villain: for Wade, as Bryce, this is an internal struggle. Wade had decided he "would reach the Third Gate, or die trying", and this decision is what made him take the tremendous risk by infiltrating the IOI. However, Bryce's hellish experience at IOI is a prerequisite for the hero to emerge victorious. While at IOI, Wade confronts his internal villain, the person who preferred the OASIS over reality, and he unites both aspects of himself in order to become something *different*. This change began when Wade initiated the exercise regime on this OASIS rig, and his trial was over when he realized that he "enjoyed" it. This self-discipline is what enabled him to enact his crazed plan inside the IOI, which will lead to Wade escaping with the compromising information the IOI had on file, and *return* to his friends with the *boon*, which in this case is the information and plan on how to deactivate the shield keeping everybody but the *Sixers* from gaining access to the Third Gate.

Meanwhile, Propp's functions fifteen to twenty are repeated inside the OASIS; after Wade has escaped IOI, he meets up with the remaining four members of the *High Five*. They device a plan, and Ogden Morrow makes himself visible as their unseen protector, and *future donor*. The

group is still under threat from IOI, and Morrow “offers them sanctuary in his home in Oregon,” (315). From the safety of Morrow’s home in Oregon, Wade, now our *hero*, join the villain, represented by Sorrento, in direct combat. This is very different from the internal struggle Wade went through inside the IOI, but it still conforms to Propp’s morphological order, *if one accepts my working hypothesis that five of Propp’s morphological functions does in fact occur twice.*

Wade will, once again, be branded during the skirmish with Sorrento. Sorrento has, for reasons we will return to during the analysis, taken on the form of *Mechagodzilla*, “a bipedal dinosaur with armor-plated skin and a pair of large cannons mounted on its shoulder blades” (332). After Sorrento took Shoto out of the running, Wade got nailed in the lower torso; “I looked down to discover that the bottom half of my robot had just been blasted away (338). This opens for the hero to continue on to step eighteen: “The villain is defeated”, subcategory one; the villain is beaten in open combat (53).

“Sorrento had tried to kill me. And in the process, he’d murdered my aunt, along with several of my neighbours, including sweet old Mrs. Gilmore, who had never hurt a soul. He’d also had Daito killed, and even though I’d never met him, Daito had been my friend. And now Sorrento had just killed Shoto’s avatar, robbing him of his chance to enter the Third Gate. Sorrento didn’t deserve his power or his position. What he deserved, I decided in that moment, was public humiliation and defeat. He deserved to have his ass kicked while the whole world watched” (339).

This is the point in the story where the *Beta Capsule* came back into play. It was given to Wade by Shoto in his will, and Wade uses it to kill Sorrento’s avatar, defeating the villain in combat. “The initial misfortune or lack is liquidated,” meaning, Wade, Art3mis, and Aech all have gained access to Castle Anorak, and Propp’s nineteenth step is repeated when our hero re-joins his friends by the Third Gate. That is when they all died (342).

“A return is generally accomplished by means of the same form as an arrival,” Propp writes following his heading for step twenty of the *Morphology of the Folktale*. All the advertisements for the OASIS, we read, all used the same tagline: “*The OASIS – it’s the greatest videogame ever created, and it only costs a quarter*” (59). Wade did not know it at the time, but the quarter he was rewarded after completing his *perfect* game of Pac-Man was actually an *artifact*, a unique object with “magical properties” (345). In *Ready Player One*, the hero’s return is thus symbolised through the concept of *resurrection*.

Step twenty-one is the sequence when the hero is pursued by the villain; “we were right,” Art3mis says on page 353.

“When the Cataclyst went off, the Sixers had a group of avatars in reserve, waiting just outside the sector. Right after the detonation, they reentered the sector and headed straight for Chthonia.”

The fact that Wade is being pursued becomes clear when we learn that the Sixers are only a few minutes behind Wade inside the simulation (354). Had it not been for Art3mis' knowledge about *Tempest*, Wade would not have completed the simulation on his first try; "Guys, I haven't played *Tempest* in years," Wade exclaims. "There's no way I'm going to beat Halliday's high score on my first attempt" (351). With the help of Art3mis, Wade is able to rack up forty extra lives, which arguably enabled Wade to keep his lead over the IOI, and finally win the *Hunt*. Thus, it is this researcher's belief that step twenty-two of Propp's *Morphology* is directly related to Art3mis, and how *she* saved the hero from pursuit. "The hero, unrecognised, arrives home or in another country," Propp writes on pages 60;

"And then, as the text faded away, I found myself standing in a huge oak-paneled room as big as a warehouse, with a high vaulted ceiling and a polished hardwood floor." [...] "I realized that I was standing in a re-creation of James Halliday's office, the room in his mansion where he's spent most of the last fifteen years of his life. The place where he'd coded his last and greatest game. The one I was now playing."

It is in this location "a difficult test is proposed to the hero," and step twenty-five literally suggest "riddle guessing and similar ordeals" are among the tell-tale signs of this morphological feature. The astute reader might have noticed how step twenty-four has been glossed over; the reason for this is its relation to a "false hero", which Wade has proven that he is not. Thus, step twenty-four is omitted in Cline's *Ready Player One*, and this omission helps support the correlation between the morphological elements of the *Folktale* as described by Propp, and Cline's modern take on the folktale.

Once Wade had completed his difficult task, namely that of guessing the password on the old IMSAI 8080 computer located in the room, the hero "is recognised by a mark, a brand, or by a thing given to him, Propp asserts. . . Once again, it is thanks to the *donor* figure that Wade is able to correctly guess the password, meaning Ogden Morrow's guidance enables our hero to complete Propp's twenty-sixth morphological function. After having placed the egg in the chalice, "I heard a fanfare of trumpets, and the egg began to glow."

"You win,' I heard a voice say. I turned and saw Anorak was standing right behind me. His obsidian black robes seemed to pull most of the sunlight out of the room. 'Congratulations,' he said, stretching out his long-fingered hand. I hesitated, wondering if this was another trick. Or perhaps one final test' ... The game is over,' Anorak said, as if he'd read my mind. 'It's time for you to receive your prize.' I looked down at his outstretched hand. Then, after a moment's hesitation, I took it" (363).

Wade looked down at his own avatar and discovered that *he* was now wearing Anorak's robes. Then he realized that the icons and readouts around the edge of my display has also changes. His stats were all completely 'maxxed out', and he now had a list of spells, inherent powers, and magic items that seemed to scroll on forever. The astute reader might once again notice that step twenty-eight has been omitted. The reason for this is its relation to the exposure of 'the false hero or villain'. Wade is not a false hero, he has triumphed over 'evil', and all morphological features relating to the notion of a 'false hero' have been systematically omitted throughout the novel. It would be very interesting to perform a morphological analysis of the *Hunt* from the viewpoint of Nolan Sorrento, but since the focus of our story has been on Wade, any morphological analysis of the character of Sorrento should remain incomplete due to his 'late' arrival in the novel.

With the transfer of Halliday's robes, Propp's morphology is almost complete. Step thirty occurs on page 367, where we read that "the feds just took Sorrento in for questioning. They stormed into IOI headquarters and yanked him right out of his haptic chair!" With Sorrento being taken into custody, Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* only requires a marriage in order to have been fulfilled. "The hero is married and ascends the throne," and this is the point where the tale draws to a close. Once Wade has completed his quest, he finally meets with Art3mis in *real life*, and they share a kiss. At first glance, this kiss is the beginning of 'the marriage' Propp claims should occur at the end of the folktale, and if the *reader* only read the story in relation to Propp's *Morphology* this would perhaps make sense.

However, the disruptive effect of transtextuality can be demonstrated by showing how the *transtextually* within Cline's novel conform to a plethora of potentiality, and how it is the *reader* who decides *how* the text should be read. This is because, as Barthes' described it, *meaning* is located within the *reader*; and the reader's subjective viewpoint thereby dictate *how* meaning is located. Thus, in a strictly structuralist reading read with Propp's *Morphology* in mind, Cline's novel could be said to convey meaning in relation to a reader's subjective preexisting knowledge regarding Propp. However, if the *reader* is familiar with Joseph Campbell's notion of the *monomyth*, and if (s)he read Propp's *Morphology* as correlating with that of Joseph Campbell's *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, *Ready Player One* could be said to conform to two different *cultural texts*.

An argument could be made to further study the difference and/or similarities between Propp and Campbell in order to further understand which of the two Cline was repurposing, but such an argument assumes the reader to be familiar with both scholars. If, however, the reader was only familiar with Campbell's *monomyth*, and Cline's novel was read in relation to only it, *or* in

relation to both of them, then, arguably, the structuralist analysis rendered would be three different ones. Additionally, Cline's novel could very well be read in isolation from other cultural texts, which would render an analysis more similar to that of Russian formalism. Such a reading is however, arguably, even more outdated and simplistic than reading in relation to Propp and Campbell. Additionally, the effects of transtextuality analysed in this investigation are related to Kristeva's notion of transtextuality which was in part based on the work of Bakhtin. As a consequence, the *social aspect* of transtextuality should, arguably, be underscored. This allows for reading Cline's novel as it relates to *culture as a whole*, as opposed to a reading that read *Ready Player One* in isolation.

Chapter Three

3.1 Open-structuralism:

In contrast to a closed-structuralist analysis, a more contemporary analysis of *Ready Player One* should suggest that the concept of *meaning* within the novel would be almost impossible to locate due to the multitude of *potential* or *relative* meaning within the text. The following analysis will attempt to demonstrate how a contemporary analysis, one that prefers an *open-structuralist* approach over that of a *closed-structuralist* approach, would seem to indicate that concept of *reader-response* is a crucial element in deciphering contemporary literature due to the fact that the theories of transtextuality suggest that all texts should be interpreted in relation to the overarching systems that they exist in perpetual dialogue with. The problem with this type of open-structuralist analysis is how it disrupts any notion of a correct way to read a novel. It actually indicates the opposite; a text can be interpreted *correctly* in a variety of different ways, all of which would be directly related to the previous knowledge of its reader.

In order to demonstrate this, the following analysis will focus on the transtextuality of *Ready Player One* in a way that differs from the previous morphological analysis since an open-structuralist analysis, arguably, would make it much harder to trace the transtextual references back into their overarching systems with any certainty. While the closed-structuralist analysis focused on analysing Cline's novel in a way that emphasised its *structure* in relation to the structure of folktales as a whole, an open-structuralist analysis should contain several *correct* ways of analysing the novel depending on which aspects of the novel one chooses to emphasise. Reader-participation is

arguably much more important in an open-structuralist analysis than it is for a closed-structuralist analysis since the most important aspect of open-structuralism is the fact that all texts can be read in relation to themselves *or* in relation to culture as a whole.

As mentioned earlier, an open-structuralist analysis does not necessarily prefer one reading over another, on the contrary, the theories of transtextuality, championed by Barthes' idea of increased agency on behalf of the reader should indicate that one interpretation of the text in relation to its transtextuality does not have to be more true than an alternative interpretation. The reason for this is the reader's inability to trace the transtextual references with any certainty back towards one system over another. It is worth mentioning that a reading that attempted to trace *all* transtextual references back into an overarching system should be destined to fail due to the plurality of potential meaning present in most texts.

This is compensated for by assuming that *meaning is relative*, which in turn will shift the focus of deciphering transtextual references away from the authorial intent and towards the reader's own knowledge base. After all, it is arguably the reader's preexisting knowledge of *culture* that would dictate *how* a reader would identify and interpret the author's transtextual references. This idea should be enough to confuse any reading with the potential of an alternative reading, which in turn would suggest that there is no *correct* way to interpret *Ready Player One*.

Based on this, the following analysis will attempt to demonstrate how there are only potential *plural* meanings within Cline's novel, depending on what aspects of transtextuality one chooses to emphasise during the analysis. The goal of this analysis is not to take away from the previous morphology but to show how *one* reading is not necessarily more *correct* than another by illustrating how the text conform to a multitude of interpretations depending on what aspects of the novel and its transtextual elements one chooses to emphasise. This section does not try to be comprehensive, but aims at showing *some* of the different ways Cline's novel *could* be interpreted in light of the theories of transtextuality. Since this analysis is written under the assumption that it would be close to, if not, impossible to identify all the different ways *Ready Player One could* be read, the following analysis will focus on three different aspect of transtextual analysis of Cline's novel in order to demonstrate just how differently one can interpret the text.

Firstly, *Ready Player One* will be analysed in relation to Joseph Campbell's *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. The goal of this analysis is to show how even something as strict as morphology is open for interpretation in light of the reader's own preexisting knowledge. The second step in this open-structuralist analysis will be to investigate *Ready Player One* in relation to the literary subgenera of *cyberpunk*. Arguably, by analysing *Ready Player One* in relation to the genre of

cyberpunk we are left with an analysis that demonstrate the correlation between Cline's novel and cyberpunk in general.

The third step in this open-structuralist analysis will be to demonstrate how Cline might appear to be deploying Kristeva's notion of *significance* to disrupt the notion of absolute meaning to, perhaps, critique the long-standing notion of *high-* versus *low culture*. This will be demonstrated by showing how the notion of *significance* is utilised in Cline's novel and to investigate its implications for any monotheistic reading. Finally, the fourth step in this open-structuralist analysis will investigate the correlation between all three previous analysis. By investigating *Ready Player One* in relation to Campbell's *Hero's Journey*, high- versus low culture and its significance, cyberpunk, and their apparent footing within '80's pop-culture. The goal of this open-structuralist analysis will be to demonstrate how meaning is relative, and directly correlated to the preexisting knowledge base of the reader.

Ready Player One contains numerous references to '80 popular culture, many of which are likely to go unnoticed by the reader when first reading the novel. The reason for this are the numerous ways the transtextual references within Cline's novel can be interpreted, either by themselves or in relation to the novel as a whole. As previously mentioned, this open-structuralist analysis of Cline's novel does not attempt to be comprehensive but aims at illustrating the relational aspect of *Ready Player One* in light of the increased agency of the reader, as championed by Barthes, and the novel's apparent relation to the popular culture of the 1980's.

3.1.1 Part One: Departure

According to Campbell's *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, the hero's journey is divided into three parts, namely, *departure/separation*, *initiation*, and *return*. The three different parts should contain a total of seventeen steps, which is close to half of the steps called for in Propp's morphology, but which paradoxically will render a narrative which is strikingly similar to that of Propp's. The following section will analysis the three sections of Cline's novel in an attempt to illustrate how it appears to conform to the hero's journey as articulated by Campbell *if* the reader were to read Cline's novel according to its apparent relation to Campbell's monomyth.

The first part of the hero's journey is, according to Campbell, that of detachment or withdrawal, which should consist of a *radical transfer of emphasis* from the external to the internal world (12). Wade could be said to have absented himself into the world of the OASIS after the death of his parents. Campbell claims that "the hero is man of self-achieved submission," which validated the idea that it is Wade who have absented himself from the world, and not Halliday or

Wade's parents who absented themselves as alluded to in the closed-structuralist analysis. This shift in emphasis is arguably all it takes to argue that Cline's novel conform more to Campbell than Propp, but to claim one interpretation of more correct than the other would undermine the theories of transtextuality which dictate that meaning is relational and directly correlating to the interpretation and memory bank of the reader.

The Call to Adventure is the first step in Campbell's rendition of the hero's journey, and it came as a direct consequence of *Anarak's Invitation*; the video testament Halliday made to explain how he had created an *easter egg* inside the OASIS. For Wade, the *Hunt* had provided him with both a goal and a purpose. "A quest to fulfill. A reason to get up in the morning. Something to look forward to." We read, that for Wade, the moment he had began searching for the egg, "the future no longer seemed so bleak" (19). This first step "consist in a radical transfer of emphasis from the external to the internal world, macro- to microcosm, a retreat from the desperations of the waste land to the peace of the everlasting realm that is within" (12). This transfer of emphasis could shift the focus from the "dystopian reality of the future" to that of an *internal journey* of self-discovery, or arguably, increased agency on behalf of the individual. Campbell echoes this sentiment by claiming that "it appears that the perilous journey was not a labor of attainment but of re-attainment, not discovery but rediscovery" (30).

The second step in the hero's journey is the *Refusal of the Call*. In *Ready Player One* we read that "the general public lost all interest in the contest. People began to assume it was all just an outlandish hoax perpetuated by a rich nut job" (8). Campbell states that "the refusal is essentially a refusal to give up what one takes to be one's own interest" (49). Additionally, "refusal of the summons converts the adventure into its negative", by which Campbell claim that "the subject loses the power of significant affirmative action and becomes a victim to be saved". Although the narrative of *Ready Player One* began with the death of Halliday, the hero's journey begins at page nine where it becomes clear that the story we are about to embark on is a direct consequence of Wade wanting to "set the record straight, once and for all", which support the idea that the affirmative action of the story is the subject that needs saving.

Step three is *Supernatural Aid*, and this is arguably an important feature in Campbell's articulation of world mythologies. In *Ready Player One* this aid appear to be related to the OASIS schools and the school-issued OASIS visor and haptic gloves. "For those who have not refused the call, the first encounter of the hero-journey is with a protective figure who provides the adventurer with amulets against the dragon forces he is about to pass" (57). Morrow's role as *helper* becomes apparent through the novel, but him and his wives' involvement with the OASIS schools and the

educational programs they developed appear to have been essential in Wade's early childhood, which means that the protective figure of Morrow, in a sense, has been present in Wade's life from an early age.

Crossing the First Threshold is step four of the hero's journey, but arguably the first step in the actual *movement* of the story. For Wade, this crossing occurred during Latin class: "That was when it hit me. Like an anvil falling out of the sky, directly onto my skull." Wade remembers that *ludos* (the name of the planet where Wade attended school inside the OASIS) is a Latin word with several meanings; *ludos* could mean *school*, but it could also mean *sport* or *game* (69). The duality of meaning of the word *ludos* is very important since it is this type of *relational meaning* that often enables transtextuality to contain what Kristeva termed *significance*. This type of *duality* or *relational meaning* play a huge part in the narrative of *Ready Player One*, and it is arguably this type of relational meaning that enables a multitude of possible correct ways to interpreting a text.

After Wade has had his epiphany, he embarks on his adventure which will lead him to the First Threshold, which in *Ready Player One* is represented by Wade attaining the Copper Key.

"The one who enters the temple compound and proceed to the Sanctuary is imitating the deed of the Original hero. His aim is to Rehearse the universal pattern as a means of invoking within himself the recollection of the life-centering, life-renewing form" (35). This should be interpreted in relation to Wade's thoughts about the correlation between *Dungeons and Dragons* and Halliday's role as *dungeon master* within the Hunt. Additionally, the *guardian* of the *Tomb of Horrors* is "the evil demilich" (74) while the *creator* is described as a *demiurgic* man of men (124). After having successfully defeated the *demilich*, Wade is awarded with the Copper Key. Unbeknownst to Wade, his avatar's name has just appeared on the *scoreboard*, and he is technically already inside *the belly of the whale*, by which I am referring to his infamous status as the first person to obtain the *Copper Key*. This concludes the first phase of the hero's journey according to Campbell, which means that the *initiation phase* may commence.

3.1.2 Part Two: Initiation

The second part of Campbell's *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* is *retold* in the second part of *Ready Player One*. As mentioned earlier, Cline's novel is divided up into three separate parts, and these parts happen to coincide with Campbell's three stages of the *Hero's Journey*, which once again validated the correlation between Cline's novel and Campbell's mythology. The first step in this second act is what Campbell termed *The Road of Trials*, and Campbell claims this to be the

favourite phase of the myth-adventure. The hero must survive a series of trials after having successfully traversed the first Threshold. It is at this point in the story that Wade appears to come to terms with the full ramifications of the Scoreboard's existence. "It [the scoreboard] would show the world who the current frontrunners are, creating instant celebrities (and targets) in the process" (102).

Additionally, Campbell writes that "it is here that the hero might discover for the first time that there is a benign power everywhere supporting him in his superhuman passage"(81). Arguably, after Wade has obtained the Copper Key and made his way to the location of the First Gate inside Halliday's childhood bedroom, this benign power is represented by the jambox sitting on top of Halliday's dresser. As the music starts playing, Wade thinks to himself "that must be Anorak's way of letting me know I'm on the right track, I thought" (105). The road of trials should be read in relation to the "deed of the original hero." Campbell writes that the aim of the hero is to "rehearse the universal pattern as a means of invoking within himself the recollection of the life-entering, life-renewing form, (35). The hero will "discover and assimilate his opposite", and this rehearsal will either destroy the hero or make him stronger. The point of this ordeal is to make the hero "put aside his pride, his virtue, beauty, and life". Once stripped, the hero must "bow or submit" to what he *thinks* is the absolutely intolerable, and it is then the hero will discover that he and his opposite (his own unsuspected self) are actually one flesh (89).

Step two and three of the second act, i.e., *the meeting with the goddess*, and *woman as temptress* draws attention to one of the problems with Campbell's comparative mythology, namely the role women are cast to portray. Arguably, a contemporary reading of the role of women in *Ready Player One* will result in an analysis that demonstrate how Cline's narrative might appear to belittles the role of women within the narrative of the *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. However, a post-modern, open-structuralist analysis of *Ready Player One* could be said to mock this role of women within comparative mythology, yet, taken at face value, Cline is arguably feeding into Campbell's slightly archaic view of women.

The role of *woman*, *goddess*, and *temptress* are all incorporated into the character of Art3mis. Campbell wrote "women is the guide to the sublime acme of sensuous adventure" (97), meaning that the climax of an internal journey, one that relates to one's perception of the world as opposed to one's placement within the world, is directly related to the hero's view of the goddess. "To deficient eyes she is reduced to inferior states, by the evil of ignorance she is spellbound to banality and ugliness." She can only be redeemed by "the eyes of understanding", by which Campbell is referring to how only the hero who can accept her as she is has the potential of

becoming her king. The role of *women* within Campbell's *momonyth* is arguably to represent what he calls "the ultimate adventure", which he claims is commonly represented by the marriage of the hero to the goddess (91). Campbell doubles down on this claim by stating that the "meeting with the goddess is the final test" of the hero, and is is there he may win the *Boon of Love* represented by an *eternity of life enjoyed*, which I believe is most commonly represented in literature with the phrase *happily ever after*.

Campbell claims that there is a restriction of consciousness that ultimately makes us fail to cope with difficult situations in life. "The crux of the curious difficulty lies in the fact that our conscious views of what life ought to be seldom correspond to what life really is" (101). Wade believes he is in love with Art3mis, but she dismisses his feelings by pointing out that he "does not live in the real world." "You're like me. You live inside this illusion." She motioned to our virtual surroundings. "You can't possibly know what real love is" (186). Halliday also appear to have had issues dealing with real emotions in the real world, which is why he preferred to interact with Kiera through her *D&D* character instead of interacting with her as herself. This resulted in Kiera becoming romantically involved with Morrow, which ultimately led to the falling-out between Morrow and Halliday. The correlation between Wade's infatuation with Art3mis and Halliday's love for Kiera should be enough to illustrate the likeness between Wade and Halliday, which leads us to the fourth step of the second act, namely that of *Atonement With the Father*.

Atonement (which Campbell defines as *at-one-ment*) represents the realisation that the *hero* and the *creator* are the same. Wade spent years researching Halliday's obsessions, which Morrow stated was one of Halliday's wishes – to share his obsessions with the world. However, atonement is only achieved by the actual following in the footsteps of the father, and in *Ready Player One* the moment where Wade and Halliday truly 'become one' is when Wade is able to beat Halliday's high-score in *Pac-Man*. "The protective power of primitive amulets and charms (...) are mankind's assurance that the arrow, the flames, and the flood are not as brutal as they seem" (107). This *primitive amulet* is represented by the *quarter* Wade receives after playing a perfect game of *Pac-Man*, thus successfully following in the footsteps on the father.

The path, however, is an internal journey like that found in Buddhism or Hinduism. Campbell quotes the Hindu monk Adi Shankaracharya who wrote:

"So long as a man has any regard for this corpse-like body, he is impure and suffers from his enemies as well as from birth, disease and death; but when he thinks of himself as pure, as the essence of the Good, and the Immovable, he becomes free..." (102-3).

This was the part that terrified Wade, because he knew there was a good chance it would end up getting him killed. But he no longer cared. He was going to reach the Third Gate, or die trying, (266). For Campbell, the point of atonement is to abandon the “self-generated double monster of the superego and the repressed id”, and the difficulty of this lies in the requirement of “an abandonment of the attachment to the ego itself”, and according to Campbell, this is the most difficult part (107-10). For Wade, this *abandonment* is when he began his transformation back towards *reality*. By taking care of his physical and psychological wellbeing by *detaching* himself from the OASIS and facing *reality*, Wade is able to discipline himself so he would be *fit* enough to enact his plan. Campbell claims that this idea is referenced in religious teachings, where the aim is not to cure the individual back to the general delusion but to detach him from delusions all together.

Campbell further claims this is not achieved by readjusting the individual’s *desire* and *hostility* since this would feed a new delusion, and in order to compensate for this one must extinguish the impulses of the individual at the very root. For Wade, this shift in emphasis can be seen in the shift of reasoning for winning the Hunt; his reason for winning is no longer the monetary gain he referenced at the beginning the the novel but to have the Hunt be over, so he can finally meet Art3mis in real life. According to Campbell, before the hero can meet the *creator*, or *father figure*, he must first “open his soul beyond terror to such a degree that he will be ripe to understand how the sickening and insane tragedies of this vast and ruthless cosmos are completely validated” (125). Once the hero has opened his soul to the terror of creation, and has become “purged of hope and fear, and at peace in the understanding of the revelation of being”, the hero is ready to meet the creator (116). Additionally, “one must have a faith that the father is merciful, and then a reliance on that mercy” (110). Apparently, the meaning of this atonement is to understand that the “delusion-shattering light of the Imperishable is the same as the light that creates”, by which Campbell is referring to the “grace that pours into the universe through the sun door is the same as the energy of the bolt that annihilates and it itself indestructible” (124).

“Then an incinerating white light filled the world, accompanied by an earsplitting wall of sound.” This apocalyptic chain of events wiped clean the entire surface of the planet, in addition to killing all the avatar’s located in the sector. This is when Wade and his friends all died, but it is also the moment when Wade is resurrected, thus ready to meet the creator/destroyer of worlds. This point in the narrative cumulates in step four: *apotheosis*. Campbell’s apotheosis contain *significance*, and as a consequence it can be interpreted in two different ways; it can refer to the climax of the story, which arguably would be the most exciting part of the narrative. Apotheosis can, however, also refer to a person’s *elevation*, or *ascension*, to that of a someone with *divine*

status. Once Wade has completed the Third Gate, he finds that his avatar is now wearing Anorak's robes, and "my stats were all completely maxxed out, and I now had a list of spells, inherent powers, and magic items that seemed to scroll on forever" (363).

If apotheosis is represented by the robes Halliday gifted Wade after he had completed the quest, and he now has the power to shut off the OASIS with a single push of a button, the *boon* Wade received is the *knowledge* that reality is "the only place where you can find true happiness. Because reality is *real*" (364). And as the hero of the story, once Wade has fulfilled step six, it is his destiny to return and share his boon with the rest of world.

3.1.3 Part Three: Return

The third, and final, part of *Ready Player One* contains what Campbell called *the return*, and the six steps it contains could be considered the final test, "to which the whole miraculous excursion has been but a prelude" (186).

"The hero has died as a modern man; but as eternal man – perfected, unspecified, universal man – he has been reborn. His second solemn task and deed therefore is to return then to us, transfigured, and teach the lesson he has learned of life renewed" (15).

According to Campbell, the *hero's adventure* is supposed to represent the moment in which he achieved illumination (222). This illumination comes as a consequence of the *internal transformation* the hero has undergone during his trials. "The modern hero-deed must be that of questing to bring to light again the lost Atlantis of the co-ordinated soul" (334). Arguably, the point Campbell is trying to make clear is how "the social unit" is influenced by an "economic-political organisation", who's goal is that of the secular state; "hard and unremitting competition for material supremacy and resources" (334).

For Campbell, the problem with modern society is how *meaning* is no longer located within a specific group. *Meaning* is, for Campbell, an inherently individualistic experience. This notion fits into the theory of transtextuality rather nicely, and also works as a way of articulating the difference between a *gunter*, like Wade, and the concept of an 'evil' corporation, like that of the *IOI*. Most importantly, step five and six, *Master of the Two Worlds*, and *Freedom to Live* indicate that Campbell's idea that the complete journey of the hero was in fact an internal struggle is correct, and all it took to *free one self* from the *delusion* was a *shift in perspective*.

Arguably, a shift in perspective is all it takes to confuse the *meaning* in *Ready Player One*. As demonstrated, Cline's novel can be interpreted differently depending on the preexisting knowledge of the reader, and if the reader of *Ready Player One* is familiar with the sci-fi sub-genre of

cyberpunk, *Ready Player One* suddenly takes on a completely new meaning. As demonstrated, depending on the reader's preexisting knowledge, *meaning* within a text appears to be related to *culture as a whole*, and that is, arguably, what makes textual analysis such an inherently individualistic experience.

Arguable, a reader without any knowledge of Propp, Campbell, and high- versus low culture would struggle to locate Propp, Campbell, or the notion of cultural critique within *Ready Player One*. As mentioned before, every reader brings his or her own preexisting knowledge and ideas with them when engaging with a text, and the meaning within a text is often influenced by presupposed ideas of its reader. That is how people can read the same text, yet end up taking away completely different meanings from the text. As for *Ready Player One*, a reader familiar with the concept of cyberpunk might render an analysis of *Ready Player One* that is completely different than the previous analysis, but might be just as correct based on what elements in the text any given reader chooses to emphasise.

Depending on what elements within *Ready Player One* the reader chooses to emphasise, the reader, arguably, makes the novel *conform* to their idea of what the novel actually *is*. This is arguably the effect of both transtextuality and open-structuralism. Harold Bloom said the web of transtextuality has become so dense that it is almost impossible to extract any meaning from it. Arguable, the problem Bloom has with understanding the *effect* of transtextuality is how *meaning* is *subjective*. It is the reader's task to *understand*, and this understanding is related to the reader's understanding of the *culture* the text is *commenting on*, by which I am referring to the *perpetual dialogue* texts communicate through, or what Bakhtin termed *dialogism*.

Cline's novel borrows heavily from the popular culture of the 1980's, and the references made in the novel relating to the concept of *popular culture* appear to all have been gathered from the '80's. There are some exceptions to this statement. *Quidditch* is mentioned as a sport in *Ready Player One*, which is a reference from the Harry Potter-universe written by J.K. Rowling. However, *quidditch* is mentioned in relation to different types of sports, thus Cline could arguably be said to use quidditch to comment on high- versus low culture by including a fictional sport along with established ones such as fencing, and football. However, if the structuralist analysis of *Ready Player One* in relation to the *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* said something about how Cline's novel is transtextual even in its narrative, which it arguably does since it appears to conform, then, surely, the literary elements within *Ready Player One* benefit from being traced back into their overarching system from the 1980's in order for us to understand what kind of novel *Ready Player One* actually is.

Chapter Four

4.1 Cyberpunk:

According to the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, *cyberpunk* is the term used to describe a specific school of writing that both developed and became popular during the 1980's. Cyberpunk is considered a subcategory of science fiction, but it is arguably also a sub-genre of dystopian fiction, which would explain its focus on retaining human agency in an increasingly *hyperconnected* society. The *cyber* in cyberpunk comes from *cybernetics*, which is based on *systems communication* and *connectivity* in both systems and living things. In relation to human agency, the presence of cybernetics could lead to *information overload*. Computers operate using binary; ones and zeros. Most people, if not all, can not read binary which is why we have computers. But in a hyperconnected society, humans themselves have limited agency since they are just small parts of a large whole; much like ones and zeros in binary. This means that within cybernetics, which is one big system of communication and connectivity, the individual parts contain less agency than the system as a whole. In literature, this concept is the *cyber* in cyberpunk.

The rebellious behaviour of the *individual*, which paradoxically belong within a subgroup of *non-conformists*, is represented by the *punk* aspect within cyberpunk. This is self-explanatory, but aesthetically it appears to be represented through a mixture of *punk-rock culture* from the 1980's along with the concept of *disillusion*. According to the *SF-Encyclopedia*, having progressive layers of the illusion peeled away is a major component within this type of literature. This should obviously be read in relation to Wade's eventual realisation that his *rig* was nothing more than "an elaborate contraption for deceiving my senses, to allow me to live in a world that didn't exist" (198). Cyberpunk literature often combines Japanese and American culture in a way that renders its futuristic world in a way that combines hallmarks from both cultures. *Samurai-*, *tech-*, *info-*, and *drug culture* all appear as staples of the cyberpunk genre, and they are all visibly present in Cline's futuristic world as well.

In 1992, Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* was published. It is considered to belong within the cyberpunk genre, although one could make an argument for it not belonging since it was not written in the 80's which apparently some critics do. Ignoring this, based on its thematic elements, *Snow Crash* is, arguably, definitely cyberpunk although it is, arguably, definitely *not* a piece of 1980's pop culture since it was published in the early 1990's. The protagonist in *Snow Crash* is *Hiro Protagonist*, might come across as a *geek* due to his interest for "samurai movies and the

Macintosh” (53). *Hiro* is perhaps a nod to *hero*, but due to his Japanese roots, one could make an argument for it being a somewhat generic Japanese name, equivalent to a *John* or *Tim* in Western culture. Regardless, *Hiro* contains *significance*, and when it is combined with his last name *Protagonist*, it becomes somewhat apparent that his name is a *pun*.

Wade Owen Watts was given his name by his father who liked alliteration due to his obsession with superheroes. It is a well known fact that superheroes have alliterative names, such as *Peter Parker*, *Bruce Banner*, and *Steven Strange*. Additionally, Wade’s initials spell *WOW*, which is arguably *cool*. As a consequence, due to the effects of transtextuality, the names of the protagonists in both *Ready Player One* and in *Snow Crash* are used for reasons of *pastiche*.

Hiro spends time in the *metaverse*, which is Stephenson’s version of the *OASIS*, but which Cline is arguably repurposing as the *OASIS* within *Ready Player One*. To enter the *metaverse*, one needs access to the appropriate hardware. Although one could make an argument for the *metaverse* being slightly more computer related, while the *OASIS* requires hardware that is more similar to that of gaming hardware. Such an argument draws a line between the world of computers and that of gaming, which, arguably, does not exist. Thus, the gaming world of the *OASIS* and the computing world of the *metaverse* are arguably versions of each other. However, since *Ready Player One* was published almost twenty years after Stephenson’s *Snow Crash* it should be safe to conclude that it is Cline that is using Stephenson’s *metaverse* for reasons of *pastiche*, not the other way around.

Both worlds, that of the *metaverse* and that of the *OASIS*, are *drawn* or *projected* onto the retinas or goggles of the people who enter, thus confusing the concept of *reality*. Arguably, it is the senses that enables us to interact with the world around us, and by *deceiving* their senses the people of both novels confuse our idea of *reality*, which, arguably, works as a way of critiquing the idea of *self-imposed imprisonment* that occurs when people fail to shatter the illusion of *what appears to be* and see the world for what it really is. This should be read in relation to Campbell’s idea that the entirety of the *Hero’s Journey* was only that of a change in perspective. The correlations between *Snow Crash* and *Ready Player One* can be seen throughout both novels, *if* the reader is familiar with *both* novels.

The great recession is arguably Cline’s version of the *hyperinflation* that occurred in Stephenson’s novel, which would mean that part of the dystopian aspect of both novels are related to the economic aspect of both worlds. Arguably, economy is directly related to the financial *system* as it exists at any one point in time. Thus, both *the great recession* and the *hyperinflation* could be said to represent a system run amok, which could in turn be interpreted to the notion of *decreased human agency* represented by huge corporate conglomerates and the idea of cybernetics. By

investigating the *duality* of the components in *Ready Player One* in relation to *Snow Crash* a correlation between Hiro's *samurai swords* and Wade's *friendship* with Shoto and Daito should also be investigated.

Hiro wields two *samurai swords*, the longer of which is called a *katana* while the shorter is called a *wakizashi*. When these two swords are carried together they are called *daisho* which translates to *big-little*, and is most likely a reference to the difference in length between the two swords. Daito is described as being a foot taller than Shoto, and as being the older of the two. Thus, Daito and Shoto can be said to function as an allusion to the concept of *big-little*, which opens up for reading Cline's description of Daito and Shoto in relation to Stephenson's description of Hiro's weapons. Additionally, *both* Daito and Shoto are described as wearing "traditional samurai armor, and each had both a short wakizashi and a longer katana strapped to his belt."

In term of transtextuality, the relationship between Stephenson's *Snow Crash* and Cline's *Ready Player One* should not be ignored, but it would be hard not to ignore the correlation if one does not possess any preexisting knowledge about Stephenson's *Snow Crash*. This represents the root of the problem with transtextuality; it only conveys meaning if the reader possess *preexisting* knowledge. Additionally, the relationship between Daito and Shoto and Hiro's *daisho* could probably be analysed in further detail, instead of just pointing out the correlation. This idea is directly related to the problem of preexisting knowledge and how far one *chooses* to trace back *potential meaning*. As mentioned, Neil Stephenson's *Snow Crash* was first published in 1992. Furthermore, Stephenson was on the list of Halliday's *favorite authors*, and Wade "read every novel by every single one of Halliday's favorite authors" (62). This means that, in addition to *Snow Crash*, a proper analysis of the cyberpunk aspect within Cline's novel should be read in relation to every novel written by all of Halliday's favorite authors.

Consequently, based on the previous observation, it should not suffice to read *Ready Player One* in relation to Stephenson and the cyberpunk genre. Halliday's list of authors include *Douglas Adams, Kurt Vonnegut, Richard K. Morgan, Stephen King, Orson Scott Card, Terry Pratchett, Terry Brooks, Bester, Bradbury, Haldeman, Heinlein, Tolkien, Vance, Gibson, Gaiman, Sterling, Moorcock, Scalzi, and Zealazny*, in addition to Stephenson. Logically, based on the ramifications of transtextuality, any analysis undertaken by a researcher that has not read *all* novels by those authors should not feel confident that his or her analysis is not flawed due to all the *potential* meanings that could lay *hidden* within Cline's novel, and which *might* be significant.

4.2 Significance

For Julia Kristeva, *poetic language* is language that contain *significance*, by which she was referring to the relational meaning of words, and how it enables an alternative interpretation or meaning. In addition to disrupting the concept of a monotheistic reading, one of the interpretations of the type of significance present in Cline's novel can arguably be said to illustrate the arbitrary difference between the notion of high- versus low culture. Based on this, it is my belief that Cline might be using Kristeva's notion of significance to disrupt, upset, and arguably critique the idea of high- versus low culture. An argument for this can be found within the word *ludos*; from the perspective of high- vs low culture, Latin is arguably considered high culture due to its importance within history and education. Thus, an argument can be made that Cline is utilising language that contain significance in order to illustrate the arbitrary difference between high- and low culture. This is arguably his goal in using terminology that can often be said to contain two relational meaning.

At first glance, some of the *cultural items* present in Cline's novel could arguably be traced back to their placement within the, arguably arbitrary, realm of *high culture*. These items, however, are within the context of Cline's novel referring back to *cultural gems*, which, supposedly, belong within the realm of *popular culture*, i.e., *low culture*. Furthermore, in *Ready Player One* it appears to be important to place *cultural object* back into their placement within a higher cultural systems, and the reader not familiar with these, supposedly, *low* cultural objects would struggle to *read* the text in a way that would make them *writers* as well as readers. This statement should be interpreted in relation to Barthes' idea of the difference between a consumer and a reader, where the reader also becomes a writer. Perhaps even more importantly, the previous statement should be read in relation to the list of Halliday's favorite authors, of which Neil Stephenson is only one of many.

After Wade located the *Tomb of Horrors*, he must *joust* with the *threshold guardian*. Again, Cline is utilising *significance* to upset the notion of high- versus low culture. Arguably, a joust, in its proper historical context is a high-culture duel between two knights, both equipped with a horse and a lance. A low-culture equivalent in a proper historical context could perhaps occur in a Western-duel; the type fought with guns. Cline, however, is referring to the videogame *Joust*. *Williams Electronics, 1982* (80). By doing this, Cline is again deploying *significance* and is, arguably, critiquing the notion of what *high-culture* actually is.

The dual role of women, namely that as *goddess* and that as *temptress*, arguably also plays into Kristeva's notion of *significance*. This claim is based on how Art3mis' role as both goddess and temptress are relative to how her existence influence the life of Wade, either by working as a

distraction or as the motivation needed to complete his quest. Cline even confuses Shakespeare's *The Tempest* to that of *Tempest*, the 1980's game for the Atari gaming console, and this use of language that contain *significance* is, arguably, too prevalent in Cline's novel for it to be ignored.

Obviously, the biggest problem with an open-structuralist analysis like this, is how *meaning* is *fluid*. As stated earlier, a post-modern analysis of *Ready Player One* should show how meaning is difficult, if not impossible, to locate. The reason for this is the reader's own assumptions and preexisting knowledge that (s)he brings with them influence *how they read*. To demonstrate just how difficult it can be to locate items of significance due to the dynamic nature of meaning we need only look at a piece of *Ready Player One*'s canonical fan-fiction written by Andy Weir, author of *The Martian*.

In *Lacero*, the short story written by Weir, we follow *Nolan Sorrento*, the personification of evil corporation within Cline's novel. *Lacero* takes place before the events in *Ready Player One*, and it modifies the entirety of Cline's story, but only for the reader familiar with this piece of fan fiction. One could argue that *fan fiction* is not canonical, and thus should not be taken seriously. This argument, however, is flawed due to Cline's public acceptance of Weir's story and the fact that *Lacero* has been included in some printed editions of *Ready Player One* since its publication (SOURCE).

Lacero is what we call a prequel, meaning that the events unfolding in *Lacero* occur before the events unfolding in *Ready Player One*. Additionally, *Lacero* has the potential to change the narrative of *Ready Player One* in a way that completely changes the story as it has been presented to us by Cline. Weir included an author's note with *Lacero*, which reads: "If you haven't read 'Ready Player One' this story won't make much sense." Arguably, this author's note demonstrates the problem with transtextuality, namely how it has the potential to influence, alter, or expand on existing pieces of culture, and how its transtextual nature would not make much sense to someone not familiar with the pieces of culture that the transtextuality is attempting to reference.

In *Ready Player One*, when Wade reaches *Archaide*, he is, arguably, following in the footsteps of the father as articulated in the analysis of *Ready Player One* in relation to Campbell's *Hero's Journey*. As previously mentioned, it is at *Archaide* that Wade discovers *Halliday's favourite pizza restaurant*, where he plays a *perfect game* of *Pac-man* and is rewarded with the quarter that will grant him an extra life after he died inside the OASIS. This part of the *Hero's Journey* is, according to Campbell, important since it was here *Wade* and *Halliday* started converging. By completing a *perfect game* of *Pac-man*, Wade proved that he was *worthy*, arguably by deciphering

the *significance* of locating a replica of Halliday's childhood pizza restaurant at Archeide and understanding the *significance of the high-score* on the machine itself.

Weir, arguably also proved himself worthy. If the effects of transtextuality were to be compared with a specific element in *Ready Player One*, the volcano in the distance of *Archeide*, the one you could run toward for days without ever getting any closer, seems to be a prime example. The story written by Weir complements Cline's novel by adding *layers* to the story. It appears that Weir had a hypothesis regarding the *backstory* of *Sorrento*, and by tracing some of the *transtextual elements* in Cline's novel, Weir appears to have reached *Star Trek*, *Back to the Future*, and *80's conspiracy theories*, which then led him to his realisation about the true nature of *Sorrento*. Weir's story has the power of completely changing the perspective of the narrative of *Sorrento*, which in turn, arguably, renders an alternative reading of *Ready Player One*.

As mentioned, *Sorrento* function within Cline's novel is that of the antagonist, or *villain*. Weir's story changed this, however, and by changing the *intentions* of the antagonist, Weir arguably changed the narrative of *Ready Player One* in relation to Campbell's *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* as well. This means that if one takes *Lacero* into account, *Wade* is arguably no longer the *hero* of the story. This claim is based on the idea that the entirety of the journey of the hero was in fact only a *shift in perspective*. *Sorrento* has already had this epiphany about the importance of *reality over virtual reality*, and his goal is not to win the contest on behalf of the *IOI*, but to shut down the entire simulation.

According to *Sorrento*, the *OASIS* is responsible for "the whole world going to hell" (1). This statement should probably be read in relation to the "dystopian mess" *Wade* described the world as being in due to *wars, famine, climate change, and the great recession*. Additionally, *Sorrento* appears to harbour resentment towards the *OASIS* because, he believes it led to the death of his sister. This works as a parallel to the death of *Wade's* mother. She and *Sorrento's* sister both died as a consequence of drug use. The point being that Weir's *fan-fiction* has *altered* the meaning of Cline's novel. This appears to have been appreciated by Cline since Weir's story has been included in some newer editions of *Ready Player One*, and all of this goes a long way in demonstrating the potential effects of transtextuality.

"This is much more than a videogame contest. It always has been" (144). Because of *Lacero*, *Sorrento's* statement can now be read in relation to his backstory. That would entail that he is referring to his opportunity to *shut down the OASIS*. *Sorrento* is arguably fighting the *system* himself. It is a difference in *perspective* between *Wade* and *Sorrento* that facilitates their respective narratives. For *Sorrento*, *Gregarious Simulation Systems* are equivalent to

drug dealers, and the *drug* they are pushing is *escapism*. Sorrento is using the IOI to facilitate the shut down of the OASIS, not to hand it over to the IOI.

Wade, on the other hand, views the IOI as an evil corporation bent on destroying the OASIS for monetary gain. Sorrento's affiliation with the IOI cast him as the *villain* from Wade's perspective. However, due to Weir's story and its incorporation into the canon of *Ready Player One* after Cline's endorsement of the story, Sorrento could be viewed as an *antihero*. This would change the relationship between Wade and Sorrento, and it would allow for an alternative interpretation regarding Sorrento's statement regarding "this [being] much more than a videogame contest." Arguably, for Sorrento, *the hunt* is an opportunity for him to make people *fix reality* by taking away their distraction. This becomes evident during the conversation Sorrento [as Lacero] has with the two *gunters* on board the shuttle in Weir's story.

Furthermore, Sorrento's *alternative* role as a sort of *anti-hero* as opposed to the *villain* can, arguably, be found within his IOI-employee number. All employees at IOI are obligated to identify themselves using their employee number as their avatar's name tag. Sorrento's ID number appear to be unique, which is why Sorrento is so easily identifiable within the OASIS (SOURCE). However, within the realm of transtextuality, Sorrento's ID number has the *potential* to contain *significance* if the reader is familiar with *A Clockwork Orange*, but if the reader is *not familiar* he or she would probably fail to recognise the significance of that numerical order. [Lacero is attached as appendix I]

In 1962, *A Clockwork Orange* was published. The story follow Alex, an arguably *controversial* character. He ends up incarcerated, and he is given the prison ID number 6655321 in the novel written by Anthony Burgess. Burgess, however, is not referenced by name in Cline's story, nor is he on the list of Halliday's favorite authors. This could however be explained by the absent *first digit* in Sorrento's ID number, which omits the first digit making Sorrento employee number 655321. That number correlates to the inmate number of Alex from *A Clockwork Orange* directed by Stanley Kubrick in 1971. Furthermore, *Kubrick* is referred to as one of Halliday's "favorite directors" (62). This creates a correlation, or *significance* between Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* and Cline's character *Sorrento*. This is, however, only *significant* if one is aware of its *significance*, and this further demonstrate how it is *the reader's independent knowledge base* that allow him or her to trace *potential meaning* within a text.

It is important to iterate that *meaning* is *relative*, and just because a reader appear to recognise a correlation or a pattern does *not* mean that this was intended by the author even though it could have been. That is why *meaning* and items of *significance* should be regarded as *potential*,

and not absolute. This can be demonstrated by pointing out items of *significance* that appear to have been omitted in the established reference lists by other authors.

In addition to lists provided by Cline, the transtextual elements located within *Ready Player One* have been cross-referenced with four secondary lists of references located within Cline's novel. These four lists have several items in common, most of which are those confirmed by Cline. However, none of the lists are identical, and the items located vary accordingly. Based on this, it would seem impossible to actually locate all transtextual elements located in relation to Cline's novel, which is, arguably, the main problem with transtextuality in general. However, as mentioned previously, it should be possible to trace the transtextual elements back into some type of overarching system even if one were to fail to locate all transtextual elements themselves.

4.3 The Impossibility of Transtextuality

As mentioned, four different secondary sources, who have all attempted to trace the transtextual references within *Ready Player One*, have been crosschecked for the purpose of this investigation. The most obvious problem with crosschecking these sources is that they all appear to have identified a *variety* of possible sources, arguably, based on their own preexisting knowledge when undertaking their investigations. Although some of the references are listed in all four of the secondary sources, the problem with transtextuality is, arguably, how every reader brings their own predispositions with them when interacting with the text.

For example: One of the lists claim Cline is referencing *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy directed by Peter Jackson. This reference is related to Ogden Morrow's estate, which bore a striking resemblance to *Rivendell* from Tolkien's novels. The problem with this *factual reference* is that another list is claiming that Cline is referencing the *animated Lord of the Rings* movie from 1978, directed by Ralph Bakshi. From the perspective of the year 2020, I have reason to believe that Cline might be referencing movies by *both* directors. And possibly even more.

“‘It looks exactly like Rivendell in the *Lord of the Rings* movies,’ I said” we read on page 322. From a transtextual point of view, Cline might be referencing the movies from both the late '70's and the early '00's. Additionally, Wade might be referencing any and all remakes of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* which, *could potentially* have been made between the last of Jacksons' movies and up until the year of 2045, which is the time that the Cline's story takes place. Based on this, instead of further investigating the references present in the secondary reference lists which was consulted during this investigation, a choice has been made to further demonstrate this *relational aspect of reading* by drawing attention to items which are *not* present in any of the secondary

reference lists and which have not been confirmed by Cline, but which, arguably, can be demonstrated to belong within the transtextual realm of *Ready Player One*. However, as I will demonstrate, the correlation between such an item and Cline's novel *should not* be ignored, although it does appear to have been overlooked in previous investigations.

George Orwell's dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, was first published in 1949. In it we follow Winston, an employee at the *Ministry of Truth*. As mentioned, and hopefully demonstrated, it appear to be almost certain that Cline is repurposing cultural elements for reasons of pastiche in his novel. Furthermore, apart from a few exceptions, such as *quidditch*, and *Firefly*, Cline appear to prefer using cultural items rooted in the 1980's in his story. He does not succeed, as mentioned, *quidditch* belong to the world of *Harry Potter*, and *Firefly* was a sci-fi show that aired on the FOX network in 2002, and which was almost instantly "hailed by television critics as being one of the most cancelled shows of the year," according to its creator Joss Whedon. This is not just a personal opinion, but, arguably, a *cultural phenomenon* that has been referenced in popular culture since its cancellation, and which would explain its presence within Cline's novel.

Based on this, and the previous analysis rendered in this thesis, it appear that an analysis of the transtextual references within *Ready Player One* seem to favour *elements of popular culture*, also referred to as *low-culture* by some, and elements of 1980's era. Orwell's name is not mentioned in any of the reference lists, nor is his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* mentioned by name. This does, however, not mean that Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* did not make it into Cline's novel. On the contrary, if my suspicion is correct, Cline might be using Orwell's totalitarian dystopia to describe the situation for the *indentured employees at 101 IOI Plaza*.

While indentured at *IOI Plaza*, Wade hacks into his hab-unit's entertainment console where he locates and downloads the IOI's files on the *High Five*. This *entertainment console* resembles the *telescreens* present in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

"The telescreen received and transmitted simultaneously. Any sound Winston made, above the level of a very low whisper, would be picked up by it; moreover, so long as he remained within the field of vision which the metal plaque commanded, he could be seen as well as heard" (5).

The idea of *surveillance* has been modified within Cline's novel:

"In addition to the camera attached to the side of my head, there was a camera mounted above the door of my hab-unit. The company didn't bother hiding it. They wanted their indents to know they were being watched.

The unit's only amenity was the entertainment console – a large, flat touchscreen built into the wall" (281).

Arguably, Cline has retained the *telescreen* from Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* along with the massive surveillance of *Big Brother*. Obviously, the *supposed correlation* between *Ready Player One* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* could just be a figment of this researchers imagination. However, the fact that there appear to be a correlation should also not be ignored in any analysis that attempted to be somewhat open. Finally, the fact that Orwell's novel is believed to take place during the 1980's (Winston believes it is 1984, but he can't be sure.), which is the period Cline appear to be referencing, arguably for reasons of pastiche, would explain its presence. Furthermore, since Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is *dystopian* fiction due to its totalitarian *Big Brother*, its presence within *Ready Player One* as the *headquarters* of the IOI does seem fitting. Finally, *if* one accepts the presence of Orwell within Cline's novel, then, perhaps, the *IOI* is a direct reference to *room 101* in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. And if it is not, then perhaps the address of the IOI at *101 IOI Plaza* is a reference to *room 101*.

As mentioned, George Orwell and his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is *not* referenced on any of the four secondary reference lists used during this analysis. Its presence within *Ready Player One* has not, to my knowledge, been confirmed by Cline either. It is, however, *my belief* that there *is* a correlation. As mentioned, the problem with transtextuality is, arguably, how it depends on its reader's internal catalog of references in order to be understood. Transtextuality, as a consequence, is not in the hands of the author, but in the mind of the reader, which creates *confusion*, and which, arguably, destroy any potential of a monotheistic reading of *any text* due to the *referential nature of language*, i.e.; transtextuality.

This is, arguably, the *disconcerting* effect that transtextuality has on the concept of *meaning*. In light of the increased agency on behalf of the reader that Barthes provided with *The Death of the Author*; it is my understanding that Barthes *emancipated* the reader from the notion of *authorial intent*. The ramifications of this is, arguably, how there can no longer be a *correct way to read* any text, since the *meaning within* the text is not so much *exchanged* between the author and the reader as it is *decoded* by the *reader* alone.

An argument for the notion of *authorial intent* can, arguably, still be made. It is after all the author who *wrote* the text. But by accepting Barthes' idea of differentiating between the notions of *consumer* and *reader/writer*, we, arguably, shift the notion of authorial intent away from the *author* and towards the *reader*.

Chapter Five

5.1 The Transtextuality of *Ready Player One*

Any analysis of the transtextuality of *Ready Player One* that hopes to be exhaustive should be doomed to fail due to the multitudes of potential meanings within any given text. As demonstrated, a text can be read in relation to itself, or in relation to *culture* or *culture specific items*. Based on this, attempting to trace all the transtextual elements deployed by Cline in his novel seems like a fool's errand. However, based on Genette's model of transtextuality, picking *selected items* for further analysis in order to see if they all refer back to some *overarching system* should be possible, the results should just not be considered conclusive. Based on this idea, what follows is an analysis of *Ready Player One* according to Genette's model of transtextuality which he divided into *five transtextual categories*, namely, intertextuality, paratextuality, metatextuality, hypertextuality, and architextuality.

Intertextuality, according to Genette, is everything related to *quotations, allusions, and plagiarism*. On the assumption that Cline did not plagiarise his novel, the intertextuality in *Ready Player One* can then be located by finding quotations and/or allusions to other pieces of culture. As mentioned, there appear to be some allusions to Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Stephenson's *Snow Crash*, and arguably, Campbell's *Hero's journey*. Additionally, ““dogs and cats living together... mass hysteria!”” is a quote from the movie *Ghostbusters* (1984) expressed to the *reader*. While Aech uses a quote from *Star Wars*, namely: “Han will have that shield down. We've got to give him more time!” as part of the dialogue between characters. So, arguably, the reference from *Ghostbusters* was intended to the reader of the novel, while the quote from *Star Wars* (1977) was intended for the characters in the novel. This separation might seem arbitrary, but, arguably, within the realm of transtextuality, nothing is arbitrary since everything contains at least two meanings due to the relational aspect of language as elaborated on earlier.

The most interesting thing about tracing transtextuality this way is, arguably, the inter-relationship between the transtextual elements analysed. Arguably, Campbell's *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* found a following in Hollywood during the late 70's and early 80's, and many movies are said to have been made in a way that made them conform to Campbell's articulation of the monomyth. Two of these movies are *Ghostbusters* and *Star Wars*. Based on this, there appear to be a relationship between *Ready Player One* and *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, in addition to *The Hero a Thousand Faces* and its relationship with *Ghostbusters* and *Star Wars*. Since an

transtextual investigation can never hope to be exhaustive, it should be enough to presume that the *transtextuality* within *Ready Player One* is rooted in *culture* which was popularised during the 1980's. One of the reason for this presumption is Cline's statements about how *Ready Player One* is a *tribute* to the people who have influenced him, as evident by the acknowledgement in *Ready Player One*.

The paratextuality of *Ready Player One* is divided into *peritext* and *epitext*. The peritext, which are items such as the title, preface, and notes, provides a lot of additional information about the novel itself. The fact that the novel is divided up into three parts, which so happen to coincide with the three aspects of the hero's journey as articulated by Campbell does, arguably, say *something*. However, the novel being broken down into three separate parts does not necessarily have to be related to the *separation, initiation, and return* as articulated by Campbell. It could reference the standard three acts of a *play*. Dividing a story into three separate parts could be said to be a reference to Aristotle, and his observation that a tragedy must have a *beginning, a middle, and an end*. Based on this observation, it appear that part of the problem with transtextuality is not only recognising *a reference*, but tracing that reference back into the system it is referring to when, arguably, any reference has the potential to refer to a *variety of systems*.

As mentioned, according to the *acknowledgments* in *Ready Player One*, Cline appear to have attempted to *pay tribute* to the people who have all "*entertained and enlightened him,*" and that he hopes his novel will inspire other people to seek out the "writers, filmmakers, actors, artists, musicians, programmers, game designers, and geeks" who, arguably, inspired him to write this story. *Metatextuality* is when one text is united with another without necessarily naming or citing it. Arguably, the metatextuality within *Ready Player One* is that of *the 1980's*. Now, logically, a decade is not a text, but from a cultural point of view the '80's was an era, thus elements associated with this era are, arguably, part of the *culture* that Cline is commenting on. Such a claim should be read in relation to Julian Kücklich loose definition of what constitutes *a text*. The only problem with this statement is that Cline has stated that *Ready Player One* was conceptualised by combining the rich and eccentric *Willy Wonka* from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* along with Cline's childhood memory of locating the *easter egg* hidden within the game *Adventure*.

Thus, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and the Atari game *Adventure* should also be included in the transtextuality of *Ready Player One*. Further support for this can be found on the front page of some editions of *Ready Player One*, where there is a *key* that, supposedly, is a direct reference to the game *Adventure*. Metatextuality, arguably, represents the crux of the problem with transtextuality, and Genette's categorisation has, in my opinion, not eliminated the problem of

confusion regarding transtextuality. The point being, how are we to identify and categorise transtextual elements when metatextuality, one of the five subcategories of transtextuality, is when a text is united with another texts *without necessarily naming or citing it*.

The *hypertextuality* within Cline's novel is hard to ignore, and the presence of such *hypotexts*, arguably, has the potential to lead the reader on to new textual revelations. Hypertextuality, differs from the other subcategories of transtextuality since it is, arguably, *these items that transport the reader* to a place that is *between the text*. Hypertextuality within computer science is most often referred to as a *hyperlink*; by pressing such a link, the reader is immediately transported to an *alternative location* within the *culture of the text* where (s)he is given the opportunity to incorporate cultural items from *culture as a whole* onto the *actual text* (s)he is engaging with.

The architextuality, which consists of elements such as genre, type of discourse, and modes of enunciation, is perhaps the most telling element of transtextuality. This is because it is the architextuality that make a text *conform* to the category of *text type*, which has the potential to influence *how* the text is interpreted. It is based on this architext a reader should be able to first identify the type of text (s)he is reading. This is because culture dictates that certain texts should conform to certain patterns, or standards. Based on these patters, a reader will most likely identify a text in relation to all other text within the same category. It is based on this we end up with texts that conform to certain standards, which, due to the architext of similar texts, should tell the reader *how* a text should be read. This is what separates a news story from that of fairytales, instruction manuals, and news articles, just to name a few.

The problem with analysing the transtextual elements within Cline's novel in a way that conform to Genette's model of transtextuality is how some elements appear to fit into *several* of Genette's transtextual subcategories. As demonstrated, an analysis of *Ready Player One* in relation to Genette's model of transtextuality *could* look something like this:

Intertextuality; *Nineteen Eighty-Four, Snow Crash, Hero's Journey, Ghostbusters, Star Wars.*

Paratextuality; *Tragedy, Tribute, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, Adventure (game).*

Metatextuality; *1980's, Popular Culture, Cline's Childhood.*

Hypertextuality; *An assortment of movies, books, music, games, and a variety of cultural elements, most of which appear to have been rooted or popularised during the 1980's.*

Architextuality; *Novel, Action-Adventure, Youth Oriented, Cyberpunk.*

The problem with rendering such an overview is how some pieces of culture appear to fit within several of Genette's sub-categories, which further demonstrates the problem with *transtextuality*.

Arguably, depending on the researcher's point of view, *Star Wars* could be said to belong to *all* of Genette's transtextual subcategories. Such a view would perhaps depend on whether or not the researcher viewed *Star Wars* in relation to *Ready Player One* itself, or if the researcher would argue that *Star Wars* is present in all subcategories that contain the *Hero's Journey*, which would depend on whether or not one accepts the *possible* correlation between *Star Wars* and Joseph Campbell, and the prevalent status of *Star Wars* as a cultural item.

5.2 Discussion

Based on the theory of transtextuality, *meaning* appear to be an inherently *subjective* term. With the consequence of transtextuality being that it would allow the reader to continue to interpret an everlasting dialogue between the text in question and *culture as a whole*. According to this, the correlation between *transtextuality* and that of the *hermeneutic circle* seem evident. Transtextuality enables relational meanings depending on whether or not one views *items* as *static* or *dynamic*. It is based on this idea that transtextuality has the potential to *disrupt* any monotheistic reading of any text, thus making it the *reader's* responsibility to *extract meaning*. This is arguably what Barthes' was referring to in his essay *The Death of the Author*, which gave increased agency on behalf of the reader, which, arguably, came at the detriment of *authorial intent*.

In light of this, *Ready Player One* is, arguably, a tissue of quotations, where the reader enables meaning by way of his or her interpretation and independent knowledge base, as opposed to subscribing to the supposed meaning intended by the author. As a consequence, any analysis of transtextuality within a given text should assume to be incomplete since transtextuality dictate that meaning can be found *on its own* or *in relation to other things*.

Ready Player One could be read in relation to Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*, which in turn would make it a *modern folktale* if one subscribes to Propp's argument that tales with identical structure can be deemed *identical*. Propp's argument does appear to make sense. His *morphology* contained *thirty-one functions*, which he further sub-divided into *abstention*, *departure*, and *return*. If we were to assume that the thirty-one functions in their *entirety* are arbitrary to the morphological composition as a whole, which is a valid claim if we accept Propp's initial statement that functions can be omitted or expanded upon without them being meaningful for the entirety of the story. Then one could argue that Propp's *morphology* is just an elaboration on Aristotle's and his take on the *three-act structure*.

Arguably, this is the main problem with adhering to a strictly structuralist approach to literary analysis. By ignoring the *potential relevance* of its parts in order to make a text conform to a

preexisting notion of what the text should be like, one *destroys potential meaning* which can have the effect of making the text *mean less*. Taken even further, such a structuralist approach has the potential of making a text *meaningless* since the consequence of such an approach can be the removal of individual meaning from any one text in order to make it conform to some more *grand structure*, as, for example, Aristotle's *three-act structure*.

In light of this, and in spite of the morphology of *Ready Player One*, arguably, conforming to the *Morphology of the Folktale*, a reading of Cline's novel that settles on focusing on the composition of morphological functions in order to make it conform to their preexisting knowledge about Propp could potentially miss out on the correlation between *Ready Player One* and *The Hero's Journey* by Joseph Campbell. It is worth noting that a transtextual analysis, one that attempted to be comprehensive, should not ignore the correlation between *The Morphology of the Folktale* and *The Hero's journey*, but should try to further understand the correlation between the two texts. The reason for this is Barthes' idea that "texts blend and clash", and if one fails to investigate the "blending and clashing" of separate texts, one run the risk of ignoring part of the theory of transtextuality which dictate that *meaning* can be found in a text on its own or in relation to other texts.

The correlation between Propp and Campbell has not been investigated here. The reason for this is that it should not matter if Propp's *Morphology* and Campbell's *Hero's Journey* are similar since they are, arguably, rooted in two different cultures. If the aim of tracing transtextual elements back towards some overarching system, namely that of *culture*, then part of the responsibility of the researcher is, arguably, to understand that texts written within a culture most likely is *commenting* on its culture, and its commentary track should be traced back to the culture that it stems from, not some *arbitrary system* that is just happens to coincide with.

It is in light of this, I would argue, that Cline is using Campbell's *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* to, arguably, make *Ready Player One* conform to a *hypotext* in its *narrative*. Evidence to support this claim can be found in the closed-structural analysis of *Ready Player One*. Cline claims to only have included those transtextual references that naturally came to mind when composing his novel. Sorrento turn himself into *MechaGodzilla* during the fight outside Castle Anorak. This might be relevant in explaining *what* transtextual elements Cline chose to utilise when writing his story. Campbell references Hinduism as part of the world mythology, and the correlation between the Hindu God Vishnu and Sorrento as *MechaGodzilla* is, arguably, also something worth noting, *especially* if it is true that Cline has made *Ready Player One* conform to a hypotext, even in its narrative.

“When I look upon Thy blazing form reaching to the skies and shining with many colours, when I see Thee with Thy mouth opened wide and Thy great eyes glowing bright, [...] When I behold Thy mouths, striking terror with their tusks, like Time’s all-consuming fire, [...] even so do these creatures swiftly rush into Thy mouths to their own destruction” (200).

Sorrento is no god, but a few seconds after he entered the MechaGodzilla “the beast’s eyes began to glow bright yellow. Then it threw back its head, opened its jagged maw, and let out a piercing metallic roar”(332). The correlations between these two aspects of the texts, and whether or not Cline *is* using Campbell’s *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* as a way of making his novel become transtextual even in its narrative can not be confirmed or denied.

Assuming that argument is correct, Cline’s novel could, according to Propp, be considered a *re-articulation* of the *monomyth*. This is based on Propp’s argument that “tales with identical functions can be considered as belonging to one type” (22), which would allow *all stories* that conform to the structure of the monomyth to be considered as belonging to *one type of tale*. Additionally, due to Cline’s incorporation of hypotexts that, arguably, also conform to Campbell’s monomyth, the *presence* of Campbell’s *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* both within the *narrative* of *Ready Player One* in addition to its presence within a selection of the *hypotexts* Cline is, arguably, referring to for reasons of pastiche, the *presence* of the *monomyth* within *Ready Player One* is, arguably, too important to be ignored.

The problem with reading a text in order to make it conform to one’s own preexisting idea of what a text, is how one run the risk of ignoring *alternative interpretations* of the same text. As demonstrated, based on the preexisting notion of a difference between *high-* and *low culture*, an alternative reading of Cline’s novel could easily gloss over the correlation between Cline, Propp, and Campbell, and read *Ready Player One* as Cline’s way of *critiquing* this long standing notion. Such an analysis would, arguably, focus on the *duality* of the *language* within Cline’s novel, and analyse the *difference in interpretation* between items of, supposed, *high-* versus *low culture*. Such a reading would, perhaps, rely more on Kristeva’s notion of *significance* than on the actual *hypotexts* Cline is referencing. The problem with this approach is, arguably, how it *ignores* the *hypotexts* Cline is using in their singularity, and only interprets them in relation to *other items of culture*. Such an analysis might find itself searching for a *duality* or *correlation* between items of high- and low culture, even if such a relationship was never intended on behalf of the author. The consequence of which is that the *reader* might read the text in a way that takes away from the text itself in order to make it conform to some *overarching notion*, arguably, not intended by the author.

The ‘problem’ with transtextuality of how it disrupts any monotheistic reading, making the text open for a variety of interpretations. This is, arguably, only problematic if one assumes that *meaning is static*, or *monotheistic*. If, on the other hand, one subscribes to the notion that *meaning is relative* and *subjective* then, surely, transtextuality becomes less ‘problematic’, or not problematic at all. The most important aspect of interpretations within the realm of transtextuality is that all meaning is rooted in the reader’s own system of references, which, arguably, enables a text to be interpreted *correctly* in a *variety of ways*. As mentioned, Neil Stephenson’s *Snow Crash* appear to share some striking details with Cline’s novel. These details are, however, only visible to a reader that is familiar with *both texts*, which demonstrates how *transtextuality* can dictate *how a text is interpreted*. To further demonstrate this we need only to revisit *Ready Player One* from the viewpoint of *cyberpunk*.

As mentioned, the correlation between *Snow Crash* and *Ready Player One* should, arguably, not be ignored. In addition to the similarities, the fact that Stephenson is mentioned on the list of Halliday’s favorite authors, and how a point is made in telling the reader that Wade has read *all of the novels by all of Halliday’s favorite authors*, should surely allow the *reader of Ready Player One* to recognise that Wade has also read *Snow Crash*. Thus, Wade’s *journey* should be read in relation to Hiro’s *investigation*, which adds a whole new layer onto an analysis of *Ready Player One* in relation to *cyberpunk*, and especially in relation to *Snow Crash*.

As demonstrated, in terms of transtextuality, the reader’s own presumptions, preexisting knowledge, and *how (s)he reads* a novel will, arguably, dictate what *meaning (s)he* is able (or willing) to located within the text. The reason for this is the relational aspect between language and that of culture, which is why any analysis of transtextuality within a given text should try to search for *potential meanings*, i.e.; plural, and not subscribe to the idea that *a text can be interpreted correctly in one way*. This is logical based on the idea that all texts can be read in relation to themselves, or in relation to the culture which they stem from.

Transtextuality enables *cultural signs* to convey additional meaning for those readers familiar with the signs. In *Ready Player One*, these cultural signs are dispersed in a way that *confuse* any *monotheistic reading* due to the relational aspect between the novel and its signs. The numerous *signs* within *Ready Player One* should, logically, point the reader toward the meaning intended by the author. Arguably, that is the purpose of a *sign*. When it comes to transtextuality, however, to “confuse the sign with what is signified,” is, according to Barthes’ *Mythologies*, “both reprehensible and deceitful” (18).

This leads us to the crux of the problem with transtextuality; namely, how it enables a text to be read correctly in a variety of ways. This reading depends on the knowledge of the *reader*, and in light of Barthes' *Death of the Author*, such a divergence in how a text can be read invites *confusion* and a multitude of *correct interpretations*. Obviously, any analysis undertaken by a researcher in order to *understand* would try its best not to be deceitful. Thus, attempting to relay what Cline is attempting to *signify* by pointing out, arguably, *arbitrary signs* in order to make Cline's novel *conform* and *signify* something *tangible* would, according to Barthes, be *reprehensible* and *deceitful*. I believe the reason for this is that by claiming that one has *deciphered the signs* in order to understand *what is being signified* would take away from the established *relational meanings of any given text*. This is unavoidable since all text can be read on its own or in relation to *texts in general*.

As for *Ready Player One*, the multitude of ways it can be read, depending on what *cultural text* one reads it in relation to, have been demonstrated by focusing on *four* alternative readings, namely those of *The Morphology of the Folktale* by Vladimir Propp, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* by Joseph Campbell, Kristeva's notion of *Significance*, and the sci-fi subcategory of *Cyberpunk*. Furthermore, this analysis of *Ready Player One* in relation to these *four cultural texts* was in no way meant to be comprehensive. The reason for this is the *multitude of potential meanings* a reader can locate within Cline's novel *if (s)he* knows to identify them.

The *significance* of *Ready Player One* is, arguably, too comprehensive to be fully investigated in any analysis of transtextuality. The reason for this is the multitude of ways one could choose to focus the analysis, which would, as demonstrated, influence the way the novel is read. Assuming one was an expert on the *signs* within Cline's novel, and one had enough preexisting information to break-down Cline's novel into the all of its constituents, what Cline was trying to *signify* would, arguably, be still be confusing. Cline's novel appear to borrow heavily from the popular culture of the 1980's. This is, arguably, disrupted by Cline's usage of culture not related to the 1980's.

Firefly is mentioned in Cline's novel. Additionally, transtextual references from *Firefly* as referenced within Cline's novel would, arguably, be missed by a reader not familiar with the TV-series, or by a reader who focused all their attention in making *Ready Player One* conform to items of 80's pop culture. Wade's ship, the *Vonnegut*, "was a heavily modified Firefly-class transport vessel, modelled after the *Serenity* in the classic *Firefly* TV series." If one were to analyse the transtextual references made in *Ready Player One* in a way that utilised 1980's popular culture to extract meaning, one might fail to recognise *Firefly* as a TV series which aired in 2002. Additionally,

one might fail to see the correlation between *Serenity*, the spacecraft, and *Serenity*, the movie. Arguably, it is irrelevant whether or not the reader is able to *read* the duality of a text as long as the reader is left with some notion of *meaning*.

The problem is that *meaning* is *relative*, and if one accepts the correlation between transtextuality and meaning, one should not struggle to see the correlation between *meaning* and *the hermeneutic circle*. The point being, transtextuality invited the reader to *read*, then *re-read* in relation to secondary information so that the initial *reading* might become *modified*. This is, in my opinion, what Barthes' was referring to in *S/Z* wrote that "the goal of literary work is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text" (4).

This can be illustrated by drawing attention to the name given to Wade's ship, the *Vonnegut* before Wade obtained it. "The ship had been named *Kaylee* [...] but I'd immediately rechristened it after one of my favorite twentieth-century novelists" (213). It is my understanding that by accepting the above statement about the name of the ship as nothing more than a statement about the arbitrary name of a ship would indicate that the reader is merely *consuming* the text. If, however, the reader is familiar with the *transtextuality* of the statement, then the reader should *recognise* the correlation between a "Firefly-class transport vessel, modelled after the *Serenity* in the classic *Firefly* TV series" named *Kaylee* and *Kaylee Frye*, the mechanical engineer onboard the *Serenity* in the *Firefly* TV series and subsequent *Serenity* movie from 2005.

This does not end the investigation into the supposed transtextual relationship between Joss Whedon's *Firefly* and Cline's *Ready Player One*. Any attempt to be comprehensive should further investigate what Whedon, supposedly, did with the *tropes* of science fiction in relation to what Cline might be attempting to accomplish using *tropes* of popular culture. To carry on, however, would be futile since the theories of transtextuality always enables the reader to go on to discover, explore, and rediscover new ways for transtextuality to lead (s)he on to new textual revelations.

Lastly, it should be mentioned that this research paper has ignored the majority of transtextual references present in Cline's novel. The numerous items of music, movies, and *culture* could *all* be analysed in relation to Cline's novel. However, due to the plural nature of *meaning* that transtextuality imposes on a text, further study of *Blade Runner*, *Rush*, *Back to the Future*, etc., would probably just add more *meaning/confusion*, and, hopefully, not take away from the analysis which has already been performed.

5.3 Conclusion:

Julia Kristeva coined the term *intertextuality* when she set out to merge and re-articulate Saussurean *semiotics* and Bakhtinian *dialogism* and *heteroglossia*. She then came up with the idea of *significance* as a way of describing the *duality* or *relational meaning* often found in transtextual discourse. The theories of transtextuality dictate that due to the arbitrary nature of signs, they do not themselves contain meaning outside of the system they relate to. This is because *meaning* is found in the *intersection* between *the sign* and that which is *signified*.

Roland Barthes, arguably, emancipated the reader with his essay *The Death of the Author*, which gave increased agency to the *reader's interpretation* of the text, but which came at the detriment of *authorial intent*. Transtextuality destroys the concept of *monotheism* since all texts can be read in relation to itself or in relation to culture as a whole. This led to Gérard Genette's articulation of *open-structuralism*, which acknowledges that all texts can be read in relation to themselves or in relation to culture as a whole.

Genette then came up with the concept of *textual transcendence*, i.e., *transtextuality*, which he defined as "all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts." He then elaborated on Kristeva's term *intertextuality*, and placed it as *one of five subcategories* within his model of *transtextuality*. Genette's *transtextuality* is, arguably, more comprehensive than lesser defined notions of *intertextuality*, which is why Genette's model has been favoured in this research paper. This does not mean, however, that Genette's model of transtextuality is flawless. As demonstrated, the theories of transtextuality make it difficult to identify and categories the, supposedly, different type of transtextual elements within any given text.

Julian Kücklich interpretation of the word *text* can, according to Kücklich, now be said to include and signify *all cultural objects*. The reason for this is the system that all elements of human culture can be said to exist in relation to. Works of literature might try to hide their relation to the system, but "the function of criticism" is, according to Graham Allen, to combat this by "rearranging the work *back into its relation to the closed literary system*" (93, His italics).

By analysing Cline's novel in relation to the system from which it emerged, the goal of this paper has been to demonstrate just how *disconcerting* transtextuality can be to the unsuspecting reader. Kücklich idea of searching for the texts a *game* "*quotes from, alludes to, or hints at*" because this might lead us on to understanding what kind of reader Cline was writing for seemed as a good idea at the time. However, due to the plurality and significance of the abundance of transtextual references, and how I, as the reader, appear to constantly stumble upon alternative ways to

potentially read Cline's novel, searching for *quotes*, *allusions*, or *hints* appear to only add to the list of potential readers of Cline's novel.

The reason for this is that meaning is *relative*, which in turn will shift the focus of deciphering transtextual references away from the author and towards the reader's own knowledge base. In light of this, and in spite of this analysis which demonstrate that *Ready Player One* could conform to the The Morphology of the Folktale, or be a re-articulation of The Hero With a Thousand Faces, of perhaps critique the arbitrary relationship between high- and low culture, or try to conform to the genre of cyberpunk, the only thing that can be said with any certainty is that *Ready Player One* is a *tissue of quotations*, where the reader enables meaning by way of his or her interpretation and independent knowledge base.

The disconcerting aspect of transtextuality is, arguably, how it disrupts any monotheistic reading, making the text open to a variety of interpretations. This is, however, only disconcerting if one assumes that meaning is static, or monotheistic. If, on the other hand, one subscribes to the notion that *meaning is relative* and *subjective*, then, surely, transtextuality would be less disconcerting, or not disconcerting at all. The most important aspect of interpretations within the realm of transtextuality is that all meaning is rooted in the reader's own system of references, which, arguably, allows a text to be read *correctly* in a *variety of ways*.

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Appendix I

Lacero

Author's note: This is a fanfic that takes place in the "Ready Player One" universe. If you haven't read "Ready Player One" this story won't make much sense. Also it has some spoilers, so you should definitely not read this if you haven't read the book.

"Ready Player One" is copyright 2012 by Ernest Cline.

Lacero sat in the shuttle's cargo bay, lost in his own thoughts. Actually, he was in a haptic feedback unit in his living room. But within the world of the OASIS, he was cruising across the sector in a dilapidated cargo ship based on the Eagle Transporter from "Space 1999".

Two egg hunters, or "gunters", sat across from him discussing their plans for finding Anorak's Easter Egg. The woman, a techie, wore a skin-tight jumpsuit with numerous belts, each laden with technological gadgetry and weapons. The other, a man sporting a long grey beard, wore a blue robe decorated with occult symbols. Theirs had been a good partnership, effective in both magic and tech zones and especially strong in chaos zones.

"How about you, friend?" said the wizard.

"Huh?" asked Lacero.

"What will you do if you win?"

Lacero rolled his eyes. "I'm not a gunter."

The two adventurers smirked to each other then turned back to him. "Suuure," said the techie. "You just happen to be a well-armed, high-level guy headed to planet Gygax?"

"Yeah, come on," said the wizard. "Thanks to that idiot Pendergast's press conference last week, everyone knows about the Copper Key clue. And it obviously refers to the Tomb of Horrors. Every gunter in the OASIS is headed to Gygax nowadays. There's no *official* Tomb of Horrors zone there, but seriously, where else could it be?"

"Fine," Lacero sighed. "I'm looking for the Easter Egg, but I'm not a 'gunter'."

The techie frowned. "Looking for the Easter Egg is the definition of a gunter, isn't it?"

"No!" Lacero said. "You gunters are part of the problem!"

The two looked at him quizzically.

"The whole world's going to hell," Lacero said. "And OASIS is why. People care more about this collection of bits and bytes than they do about the real world."

“Oh come on,” said the wizard. “Life’s tough, yeah, but you can’t blame OASIS. The fossil fuels ran out, corporations got too much power, and-”

“Bull,” Lacero interrupted. “That’s just an excuse people use to dodge responsibility. The world is what we make it. We could have found solutions to the energy crisis if we’d tried. And the corporations only took over because no one else was willing to deal with the crap necessary to run a society. No one cared. The whole damn world is obsessed with this place. It’s a constant escape from reality. But it’s *not* reality. And the real world is crumbling around us while the people obsess over idiotic video games.”

“OASIS does tons of good for people,” the techie protested. “Their schools are the best primary educational system in the world, and they’re free.”

“Yeah whatever,” Lacero said. “A few PR stunts doesn’t absolve GSS of their sins. You know what they are? Drug dealers. They sell is escapism and the whole world is addicted. And it’s every bit as destructive as heroin. A few schools won’t wash the blood off their hands.”

“Oh come on,” said the wizard. “What blood?”

“My sister, for one,” Lacero said darkly.

The two gunters remained silent for a moment. Then, the wizard said. “Okay... what do you mean?”

“She spent every waking moment in her haptic,” Lacero began. “She ignored friends, family, and anyone else who cared about her. She’d only leave OASIS long enough to eat and sleep. And half the time she’d do that while wearing her haptic anyway. She lived in a meth-infested tenement, spending what little money she had left from Dad’s will on her stupid obsession.

“When Halliday died she went in to overdrive. When the hunt first started, people didn’t realize everyone would get stumped. Some thought it would only be a matter of days, maybe weeks before it was all over. She became obsessed. She stopped sleeping because it took up too much time. She started taking meth to stay awake. She figured she could sleep later. You can guess where this is going.

“She’d been dead in her haptic for three days before she was discovered. The only reason anyone noticed was because neighbors complained about the smell. Drug overdose, of course.”

“Sheesh,” said the techie. “Sorry for your loss. That’s terrible.”

“You want to know what I’ll do if I win? I’ll shut down GSS. Dismantle everything it has and sell it off. OASIS will be dead, and people will *have* to face reality. They’ll be forced to live in the world they’ve been neglecting. Then maybe, just maybe, they’ll start to make it better. Meanwhile I’ll be rich.”

“You’re kind of a zealot,” said the wizard. “You know that?”

“Damn right I’m a zealot,” Lacero said. “This isn’t a game. The fate of the world is literally at stake here. And I would happily kill for this cause. And I don’t just mean avatars, either. I mean in the real world. You get me?”

The two gunters were cowed into silence. It didn’t matter. He wasn’t interested the approval of escapism-addicts or anyone else in the OASIS. As far as he was concerned, they were all enemies. Gygax turned out to be a bust. Not only was it crawling with gunters, there was no hint of the Tomb of Horrors anywhere. It would be another two months before he made progress.

Having researched the matter thoroughly, Lacero knew that one of Halliday’s first purchases when he got rich was a reproduction of the DeLorean from *Back to the Future*. It was a popular model of transport in OASIS, and one of the game’s original available craft.

Of course, the Time Control circuits were just for show and the Flux Capacitor did nothing. OASIS could do a lot in its simulation, but it couldn’t make you travel in time. It would have to reverse the levelling and progress of all the other players. No, it wasn’t possible.

Or was it?

There were numerous areas in the OASIS that were “instance zones”. That meant they would create a duplicate of themselves for everyone who entered. Each person would get their own private copy while they were there. It was a common video game technique dating back to the early part of the century.

Lacero realized that an instance zone, having only one player to work with, could actually have time travel as a mechanic. So he bought a DeLorean time machine (they were available at countless shops), and started exploring as many instance zones as he could. At each one, he would try the various dates Marty McFly travelled to in the films: November 5, 1955; October 26, 1985; October 21, 2015; and September 2, 1885.

It never worked. The car would go through the motions of sparking, flaming tire tracks, and a bright flash when he reached 88mph, but no time travel would occur. At least, not until he got to Cloud Cuckoo Land.

Cloud Cuckoo Land was a planet covered with the most extreme and bizarre conspiracies anyone had ever come up with. It had a number of scenarios players could take part in, from uncovering an Illuminati to finding crashed alien spacecraft to any other strange or new-age ideals people could imagine. On Cloud Cuckoo Land, they were all true.

Occasionally, people wondered why there was a reproduction of Mt. Shasta in an otherwise unimpressive mountain zone. Those that had visited it also wondered why they were placed in an instance zone when there wasn't anything worth doing there.

Lacero had picked up on this oddity while searching around for instance zones and decided to check it out. Once there, as usual, he tried the various *Back to the Future* dates. He had the flying version of the DeLorean, so getting up to 88mph was not a problem. But as usual, nothing happened other than some special effects. He was about to leave when a thought struck him: What's so special about Mt. Shasta?

He did a simple search online for Mt. Shasta in the 1980's, and found something significant: The Harmonic Convergence.

The Harmonic Convergence was a new-age cultish phenomenon that came and went in 1987. It was supposedly a major event in the Mayan calendar that coincided with a planetary alignment. The convergence was strongest in certain "power centers" of which Mt. Shasta was the most potent. In reality it was just a bunch of drug-addled hippies convincing themselves they'd had a shared experience. It was a perfect scenario for Cloud Cuckoo Land. But there was one catch: The Harmonic Convergence could not be done at any old time. It began on August 16th, 1987 and only lasted two days.

Lacero typed the date into his Time Circuits. He gunned the hoverdrive until he hit 88mph and the usual flash happened with flaming tire tracks left behind him. But this time, something was different.

A moment ago, it had been winter. Now it was much greener, and a large crowd was visible at the base of the mountain. He'd "traveled in time". He landed the DeLorean at the edge of the crowd and joined them.

At least 100 people, all in 1980's apparel, sat in a circle and chanted. Had they been real people, he would have been disgusted by the ridiculous display. But these were just NPCs, controlled by the computer, and part of the scenario.

He sat among them and half-heartedly chanted as well.

After a few moments, clouds formed over the chanting circle and the wind picked up. The NPCs cheered as the Harmonic Convergence began. Then, words appeared in the sky and the booming voice of James Halliday read them throughout the heavens:

You seek solutions to the gates,

But know you what reward awaits?

Like Kirk, Scott, and Chekov, too

The genesis is all for you

Lacero laughed. He'd figured out the meaning immediately. At last, he saw a way to make it all happen! Everything he wanted! It could be done!

"I have to say, you tested in the 99th percentile of all candidates," said the interviewer.

"Thank you," said Lacero.

"It was one of the shortest hiring discussions we've ever had. You scored extremely high on intelligence and determination. Also, your knowledge of Halliday is exemplary. We believe you could be a valuable addition to the IOI family in our Oology Division."

Lacero nodded. "Sounds great."

"We'd like to offer you a full-time job." The interviewer waved his hand and a contract appeared in the air. It flew to Lacero and hovered in front of him. "We'd like an answer within 24 hours. Feel free to review the contract. But I can give you the basics: Free room and board at the real-world IOI headquarters in Columbus, Ohio. Medical, dental, two weeks of vacation per year, the usual stuff. And if you are the one who actually finds the Easter Egg, you'll get a twenty-five million dollar bonus. Of course, should you find the Egg, all benefits from it become the property of IOI."

"Understood," said Lacero. He took a moment to look over the contract. There was a lot of legalese, but it was clear that IOI would get all the GSS stock if he found the Egg, and they would also control any special abilities his avatar got as a result.

It didn't matter. They'd never get a chance. The Harmonic Convergence made that clear.

You seek solutions to the gates, but know you what reward awaits? It didn't get much more blatant than that. The clue wasn't about the Copper Key. It was about the prize itself.

Like Kirk, Scott, and Chekov, too, the genesis is all for you. The names mentioned were, obviously, all characters in *Star Trek*. While the TV show was from the 1960's, four of the *Star Trek* movies came out in the 1980s. Right in Halliday's wheelhouse.

Within the *Star Trek* universe, the "Genesis Device" was an invention that could create life on a lifeless world. It would also destroy any life that was there to begin with. So the winner of the Egg would have the power of life and death in OASIS. That was hardly notable. In fact, it was pretty much to be expected.

More important, though, was the mention of Kirk, Scott, and Chekov. It was a reference to a specific scene. In the two movies related to the Genesis Device, there was only one scene where those three characters, and only those three characters, did something together: When they entered the self-destruct codes for the Enterprise in *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock*.

So there it was. The winner of the Egg would have the power to destroy the entire OASIS. It was Lacero's dream come true. If he won, he would activate the self-destruct immediately. That would be it. IOI could cry about it later, and they'd probably sue the pants off him. They might even try to kill him out of spite. But if they wouldn't be able to bring OASIS back.

"I'm sure everything will be in order," Lacero said, pressing his thumb to the contract to sign.

"Great!" said the interviewer. "Oh, and we're going to need to know your real name, for legal purposes."

"Sorrento," he said. "Nolan Sorrento."

The interviewer shook his hand. "Welcome aboard, Nolan. Your employee number is IOI-655321. I think you'll fit right in."