# GAMIFIED SELVES: TRAUMA, PLAY, AND COMING OF AGE IN *ENDER'S GAME* AND *READY PLAYER ONE*

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**Abstract:** *The complex landscapes of games, narratives, culture and pedagogy, have never been more important in an interconnected and digitalized environment. This article contends that play works not as distraction or evasion per se but rather as a vital storytelling and identity constructing tool for trauma, cultural memory, and adolescence. Alternatively, online and virtual play spaces serve as sites for monitoring morality, exploring identity, and shifting from passive voyeurism to active participation both in the self and within the world. As such, just as playing—whether "real" or "cyber"—has become the dramatic metaphor for growing up in a gamified world. We will look at what role the motif of the game and play plays as a central metaphorical and structural fundament for the processes through which young protagonists in Orson Scott Card's Ender's Game and Ernest Cline's Ready Player One shape their identity and act in digitally mediated environments.*

**Key words:** identity, young adult, games, cultural memory, gamification, storytelling, coming of age, trauma

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## Foundations of Play and Game Studies

The notion of play – an activity often posited as separate from "real" or "ordinary" life – is central to game scholarship. One of the key metaphors of this literature is the "magic circle," which originated in Johan Huizinga's classic study *Homo Ludens* (Calleja, 2012: 2; Huizinga, 1955: 10–11). This idea, prevalent throughout the field of games studies, presents the game world separated from the "real" world, or the ordinary world (Calleja, 2012: 2). Huizinga's range of "play-element" was indeed very wide and extended across many different cultural fields such as law, war and poetry for example, and it has for instance been observed how legal proceedings have a play-character and how riddles were used as a way of

getting at knowledge (Huizinga, 1955: 78). He asserted that "culture arises in the form of play, that it is played from the very beginning" (Huizinga, 1955: 46).

But this classical dichotomous perspective in regards to play and reality has been highly criticised, notably in the area of digital games. Theorists such as Copier, Lammes, Malaby and Taylor have challenged the usefulness of the "magic circle" term, particularly when it is used in relation to digital games (cited in Calleja, 2012: 2). They contend that the notion of depth involves normative underpinnings concerning the experiential quality of gameplay and problematic implications for one to comprehend digital interactive experiences (Calleja, 2012: 2). This is the proposition that I am exploring in the paper, which is that the metaphor that we used in order to understand something may be actually misleading us in that understanding, the mischaracterization being true of the magic circle, according to Gordon Calleja (Calleja, 2012: 3). This spatial marker of the magic circle is not even something that Calleja deems to occur in digital games (Calleja, 2012: 7). He asserts that the "dichotomous view on the relationship between play/games and the real world does not survive close analysis" (Calleja, 2012: 6), claiming that in digital games, unlike physical games, rules are largely upheld by "machine code" rather than "social agreement" (Calleja, 2012: 7, 10). As a result, players' lived experience seeps, to varying extents depending on the circumstances, into their game experience and the game's experience into theirs, and we are presented with a more porous rather than fixed boundary between the game world and reality.

Jacques Ehrmann radicalizes this critique when he claims that Huizinga and Callois are mistaken in taking for granted a "reality," a "neutral and objective" point of reference against which play is oriented (Ehrmann, 1968: 33). Ehrmann claims that "there is no 'reality' (ordinary or extraordinary!) outside of or prior to the manifestations of the culture that expresses it" (Ehrmann, 1968: 33). He is well known for claiming that "play, reality, culture are synonymous and interchangeable," and that "the distinguishing characteristic of reality is that it is played" (Ehrmann, 1968: 56). This view suggests that every theory of communication is also a theory of play and of games (Ehrmann, 1968: 56). Ehrmann also contests the stereotype that in a game "it is the player who plays", suggesting instead that "players may be played; that, as an object in the game, the player can be its stakes (enjeu) and its toy (jouet)" (Ehrmann, 1968: 55). This perspective renders inoperative the "subjectivity-objectivity dualism" (Ehrmann, 1968: 56).

The "lusory attitude," an idea made manifest by Bernard Suits in which players knowingly enter into an "experiential mode that was apart from ordinary life," (qtd in Calleja, 2012: 8) is also connected to the magic circle concept. But this becomes a "problematically circular argument" (Calleja, 2012: 8) when one is considering digital games, particularly single-player games, where to adopt an inefficient means of playing is precisely what makes an activity game like – and

where it could follow that some activities are not games if players do not have to choose to be inefficient. Ethnographic studies also suggest that this split of game-experience from outside-world experience is "not found in the situated study of gamers" (qtd in Calleja, 2012: 9). This theoretical perspective emphasizes how play and games, particularly those played online, are entwined with and influenced by cultural contexts and lived experiences rather than being disconnected from reality.

Game studies' theoretical discussions, which usually reference cultural studies, stress the importance of critically and constructively considering important ideas and underlying metaphors in order to advance the field (Calleja, 2012: 1, 5). Scholars of game studies advocate for a "qualitative and critical analysis of computer games as 'texts,'" using textual analysis as a foundation to investigate how texts construct meaning (Roach, 2015: 29–31). This approach illustrates how games' interactive elements subvert conventional notions of authorship and meaning, making them appropriate for literary studies (Roach, 2015: 31–32).

## Play in Digitally Mediated Environments and Hyperreality

Since computer games became popular in the 1980s, they have sparked new scholarly debates that go beyond the conventional literary analysis (narratology). This has forced researchers to come up with new approaches to the "richness and differences of the game space" (ludology), as Roach asserts (Roach, 2015: 7). Concerns about the medium's cultural effects were also raised by this shift (Roach, 2015: 7). The concept of gamification, or "the introduction of play elements into other kinds of activity," has influenced a wide range of social interactions in the digital age, from political life and activism to corporate operations and educational practices (Condis, 2016: 15; Roach, 2015: 28). Jane McGonigal's influential work, including her TED Talk and book *Reality Is Broken*, underscores the "untapped power of the game" and positions it as a force that can "make a better world" (McGonigal qtd in Roach, 2015: 1). But this generalized excitement also betrays an "anxiety surrounding the breakdown of that binary" between play and work, common distinctions become increasingly fudged, where "play becomes everything to which it was opposed. It is work, serious, morality, necessity" (Roach, 2015: 2, 11). This phenomenon, what critics called a "playbor," is part of a "complex matrix of interwoven and overlapping struggles for power" (Roach, 2015: 11).

In this context - a field increasingly shaped by new digital media - the problematic of hyperreality is of specific importance. As one can see in Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One*, hyperreality is an "artificial reality that feels real" (Dalimu et al., 2020: 2). It is a "combination of delusion and reality, truth and error, and the past and future are all fused into one and become a new reality so it is difficult to distinguish" (Dalimu et al., 2020: 237). This hyperreality is largely a result of

technology, which provides new ways and means of experiencing and acting radically differently from life in real (Dalimu et al., 2020: 2). The OASIS in *Ready Player One* is a good example for this (Dalimu et al., 2020: 2). In this dismal future world, many people choose the OASIS over the real world because their real lives are "awful and dilapidated" (Yu-xin, 2023: 165). The virtual world offers "attractive visuals, pleasant feelings and unlimited imagination," making it difficult for users to differentiate between reality and imagination (Dalimu et al., 2020: 3-4). The OASIS thus becomes an "emotional refuge" and an "escape from Wade's economic and social insecurities," a place where one can find unlimited opportunities and everyone can achieve their desires (Oripeloye, 2024: 1392). This ease and thrill make more and more people like to stay in the virtual as they can escape away from the "awful life in the real world" (Yu-xin, 2023: 167).

This sharp contrast between the "broken and chaotic real world" and the "wonderful and colorful virtual world" in *Ready Player One* raises a crucial question: the potential for human beings to be "enslaved by technology" and "lose themselves" (Yu-xin, 2023: 168). The book is also a parable on the perils of escaping real space in favor of the seamless virtual immersion (Yu-xin, 2023: 169). But it's not just escapism: it's also that the system ties game mechanics into the very formation of the world itself. Game rule elements and goal elements are often used to build the fictional world in Hollywood science fiction movies such as the film adaptation of *Ready Player One* (Xiong, 2023: 436). Mechanistic, or "rigid rules," provide the "framework for the characters' actions," maintaining internal consistency of the science fiction universe (Xiong, 2023: 436-37). However, a "humanistic view" can be generated, in which players import "rules of humanity in a real human world" into the game, e.g. help among friends (Xiong, 2023: 437). The "free-form rules," in turn, can prioritize human nature and justice and can promote innovation in the world system (Xiong, 2023: 437). The idea of "infinite games," the point of which is to perform "the keeping of the play going" as opposed to winning, entails "divergence" in the story, different meanings, and implications in what may be done or what a system or situation "may mean in the future" (Xiong, 2023: 436, 440). This is illustrated by Wade's decision to shut down the OASIS server two days a week (in the movie version), in which real-world experiences take precedence over uninterrupted virtual involvement. What this demonstrates is how gameplay can rise above simple mechanics to effect a game or indeed, a world, a work of fiction to its core – humanistically.

While Wade's decision to restrict access to the OASIS shows a preference for ethical reality in the real world over virtual flakiness, it also highlights a broader conflict between play as immersion and identity construction in digital culture. The OASIS is a rich intertextual zone that has been developed over decades of media history, particularly that which is significant in gaming subcultures. It is more than

just a game universe. To fully grasp the implications of Wade's actions, however, we must comprehend the cultural framework that is forming around the OASIS and how *Ready Player One* uses an intertextual discourse to create a world in which mastery of digital lore is a sign of power.

With frequent references to a "geeky canon" of classic video games, cyberpunk literature, films, and comic books, *Ready Player One* is firmly rooted in the digital gaming subculture (Condis, 2016: 8). With reference to James Halliday's character, the novel specifically organizes the subcultural group's entire body of knowledge in the manner of a "alternative literary canon" (Condis, 2016: 3). Halliday's "egg hunt" serves as a teaching tool, a "classroom" where readers can discover the history of "gamer-dom" and demonstrate their "geeky credentials" by becoming proficient in these foundational texts (Condis, 2016: 3). Reading must be viewed as a kind of "playing through" of the text, akin to playing video games, in order to master this canon, which calls for the ability to perceive and yet read, arrange, and interpret these texts competently (Condis, 2016: 2). In the novel, "gunters" (short for "egg hunters") look at the knowledge of Halliday's canon and perceive it as a form of "social currency and status" (Condis, 2016: 6).

But even as *Ready Player One* venerates a joyful, participatory fan culture in the context of the canon that is Halliday's canon, it also cannot help but reckon with the thorny issue of canon formation itself. The valorization of certain media artifacts as capital raises questions about who gets to decide what has value in a subculture and on what terms. The egg hunt, as inclusive as it is in theory, establishes lines that separate the "real" from the outside does-not-ins: the ones who can't master, or parse, the canon. Here, the text has begun to dismantle the exclusivity that such formalizations of taste or cultural hierarchy are always entangled with questions of social privilege and historical moment.

All canon formation - whether of "high" or "low" culture, is 'fraught' simply by virtue of the exclusionary decisions it entails, but also - as we will see - by the decision in which form of cultural production units or 'tokens' of cultural capital are to be counted (Condis, 2016: 7). These move whether or which may serve without necessarily excluding, or in which manner expert classes may be distinguished from the populace as a whole, are shaped by specific historical material conditions (Condis, 2016: 7). These concerns about cultural worth and narratological sovereignty also map onto the novel's plot structure. Apart from the overt games references, the story structure of contemporary science fiction, including *Ready Player One*, can be explored through the application of tools such as Propp's morphological theory of the folk tale (Putra, 2022: 120). Originally applied to the investigation of the fairy tale, nonetheless, this technique is possibly capable of shedding some light on the more complicated narrative structure of contemporary

fiction, with many a subtler layers of story than traditional oral discourse, though some sequences of functions can be altered (Putra, 2022: 121).

That said, Propp's analysis of narrative structure is not sufficient by itself to explain the sociopolitical undercurrents that shape *Ready Player One*'s world. The ease with which the novel taps into familiar narrative roles is complicated by its housing within a dystopian setting – a world of ecological disaster, corporate authoritarianism and pervasive disenfranchisement. In a sense then, the novel is on a border between nostalgic play and critical commentary, engaging with dystopian traditions that speak to fears in the world. These are themes that situate the novel not just within speculative fiction but within the larger tradition of literature daring to probe the sociocultural fallout of technological progress and systemic disintegration.

Thus, *Ready Player One* is also a text that dovetails with the genre of dystopia, echoing its concern in contemporary anxieties concerning environment resource depletion, hyperaccelerating globalization, and societal collapse (Hanssen, 2017: 46; Bezrukov and Bohovyk, 2022: 53-55). Dystopian stories often reflect on the "mutation of dystopian identity" since they make use of the fears of a specific time period (Bezrukov and Bohovyk, 2022: 55). Writers employ different terms to describe their imagined "AGEs," such as Orwell's "age of uniformity," Bradbury's "age of the disposable tissue," Towfik's "dark ages," and Rushdie's "Age of Anything-Can-Happen" (Bezrukov and Bohovyk, 2022: 63). Such stories often have a "little man's perspective," creating a "nearly real world" that can lead characters toward "madness" as they try to cope with societal challenges (Bezrukov and Bohovyk, 2022: 56). Dystopian YA novels, in particular, often act as a revised Bildungsroman, showcasing personal growth in a postmodern world which is no longer necessarily marked by multinational capitalism (Korsnack, 2015: 25).

Games themselves act as a primary metaphor and medium for that act of identity formation in both *Ender's Game* and *Ready Player One.* Wade and Ender must grow up, make sacrifices, and define themselves by defining who they are not—against systems of control—in that virtual world, which is a high-stakes, gamified environment that mirrors larger ethical quandaries in meatspace. In these tales, games transform from simple escapism into self-discovery crucibles and coming-of-age situations where learning to play, lose, and make morally sound decisions are all intertwined.

This combination of dystopian setting and ludic form also demonstrates how speculative fiction consistently reimagines adolescence as a deeply political and ethical journey, in addition to a mental one.

## Identity Construction, Adolescence, and Trauma through Play

In these texts, identity formation and coming-of-age are profoundly modulated by the theme of game and play, particularly for a young protagonist facing challenging circumstances. For example, vulnerable protagonists who fight "constant environmental, social, and political challenges" are the hallmark of Young Adult dystopian fiction, as exemplified by shows like *The Huger Games*, *The Maze Runner*, and *Divergent* (Hanssen, 2017: 41). These stories frequently include a shift from helplessness to "self-sufficiency, responsibility" and frequently address the "adolescent quest toward identity" (Hanssen, 2017: 45, 47). Indeed unlike traditional YA where rebellion is internal to society, in dystopian YA protagonists often "leave home and mak(e) one's way in a hostile and challenging landscape" (Hanssen, 2017: 46). The traditional liminal space—the wilderness in most of these narratives—functions as an essential "holding area where the characters are able to redefine their notion of home to a healthier one" (Hanssen, 2017: 48).

The protagonist in *Ender's Game*, Ender Wiggin is "split" or forced to fit an "either-or fallacy" (Sander, 2013: 83) as "half Peter and half Valentine" (Card, 1994: 19) (his brother and sister) -an aggressor, violent identity (Identity A) or a caring, empathetic one (Identity B) (Sander, 2013: 83). The book grapples with the (to me at least) somewhat difficult issue of intent vs. action, as Ender keeps doing evil, up to and including accidental genocide, without murderously evil intent, and thus harboring incredible guilt and self-hatred. Traumatized throughout his training, he is driven to the 'brink of suicide" (Sander, 2013: 86). The story discredits the idea that "only intentions matter in making such judgments," (Sander, 2013: 82) insofar as Ender feels the guilt of his actions despite counter-arguments of innocence.

His story is one of coming to terms with this horror, of recognizing the implications of his deeds, and learning to redefine himself afterwards - beyond the dangerous duality to a more holistic and complete being. This internal struggle aligns with Cathy Caruth's understanding of trauma as an "unclaimed experience," a happening not fully known and absorbed at the time of its occurrence, which, unaccountably, returns to the lives of survivors in the form of insomnia, literal nightmares and repetitive reenactments (Caruth, 1996: 7-8). Sigmund Freud's books *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *Moses and Monotheism* investigate this repeated occurrence of suffering and how devastating events appears to be repeating in the lives of those that had those experiences (Caruth, 1996: 5, 11). Freud's own writing of *Moses and Monotheism*, characterized by the repression of a history and "extensive repetition," becomes in itself a trauma site in which history is shown to be complicit in a traumatic construction (Caruth, 1996: 17).

Literary, psychoanalytic, or theoretical texts, for example, "both speak about and speak through the profound story of traumatic experience" (Caruth, 1996: 4).

The language of trauma is itself often "literary" language, at once resisting transparent comprehension and asserting to achieve it (Caruth, 1996: 5). This is because trauma exists in a twisted grip of knowing and not knowing, testifying to the tenacity of some other "forgotten wound" out there beyond any attempt at conscious theorizaton or thematization (Caruth, 1996: 5). This speaks to how, as an understanding of a nightmare within a broader theory of dreams, trauma theory addresses the traumatic effects of external realities on symbolic systems (Caruth, 1996: 59, 62).

Literary theorist, such as Paul de Man finds that the philosophical project of drawing a distinction between language and empirical law paradoxically results in the production of fiction each time an effort is made to write about a "direct or phenomenal reference to the world" (Caruth, 1996: 76). De Man's examination follows the manner by which the "figure of a falling body" figures as a crucial instance for apprehending referential resistance and the performative construction of discourse in Kant and Kleist (Caruth, 1996: 5). This underscores that trauma is not only an outside event, but is also a "possibility inscribed in experience," an "unexpected interruption" that transmits what is most accidental and unique to its actual occurrence (Caruth, 1996: 115). The problem, therefore, is to figure a crisis whose characteristic is not a "mere" knowledge but the proof of a knowledge and demand for witness as well (1996: 5; 136). In clinical discussions of language and trauma, a way of incorporating trauma is to make trauma become part of a "meaningful (and thus sensible) story," yet Caruth encourages thinking other relations in this vein, particularly when trauma is "what is not known or not fully experienced" (Caruth, 1996: 117, 137). This connection leads to recognition that history is not and cannot be exclusively one's own, it is what we recognize as "the way we are implicated in each other's traumas" (Caruth, 1996: 24).

Caruth's idea that trauma is an unassimilated experience which refuses to accommodate a narrative can lead us to think differently about how people work through internal injury and express that outward. Nowhere is this more poignant than in dystopian fiction, where individual trauma is frequently paralleled by societal collapse. The protagonists of these tales live in broken worlds in which personal and communal pains easily blend. Indeed, the psychological impact of dystopian realities featuring dislocation, surveillance, and existential despair reverberates with the post-traumatic symptoms as outlined by Caruth. So dystopian heroes are often driven by coping mechanisms that are a form of that struggle to reframe trauma, ascribe meaning to it (or not survive without it).

The "little man's perspective," (common in many works belonging to the dystopian genre), assists in building a "quasi-real world"; it lures the personages into difficulties, it pushes them "towards madness" (Bezrukov and Bohovyk, 2022: 56). In these tales, heroes frequently turn to the drugs or alcohol to distract them from a

life of inactivity, impotence or out of despair (Bezrukov and Bohovyk, 2022: 58). Dystopian YA texts provide a "sanctuary" and aid in developing both analytical skills and environmental awareness (Hanssen, 2017: 43, 49, 53). Above all, play becomes a critical developmental vehicle for grappling with trauma, cultural memory, and the strains of adolescence.

The young characters' escape into altered states or escapist activities certainly can be understood as a reaction to the unprocessable nature of their surroundings, as a desperate ploy to construct an other for the self, or perhaps a self for the self in a reality where they can exercise agency. What becomes clearer from this response is that digital play, quests and building of avatars are not distractions but important strategies of identity formation in this instance. In other words, as seen in *Ready Player One*, Wade Watts doesn't seek out drugs to escape his harsh reality but he immerses himself in the OASIS. His journey, built around the tropes of a classical hero's quest, demonstrates how game worlds can function as narrative and therapeutic conceits for working through trauma, transforming the self, and renegotiating cultural identity.

Additionally, Pandu also theorizes that the protagonist of *Ready Player One*, Wade Watts follows the "monomyth" structure. Wade starts off as an "antisocial and awkward" orphan in a "terrible" dystopian world (Pandu, 2020: 22) and undertakes a "cyber adventures" quest in the OASIS (2020: 21), in the hope of winning a legacy and ultimately "bring balances in his ordinary world" (2020: 21). The OASIS acts as a "getaway" (2020: 21) from his real-world surroundings, allowing him to embody "idealized masculine traits" through his avatar, Parzival (Oripeloye, 2024: 1388). This is a process of "gamification of identity," where Wade's persona is formed through "competitive gaming culture," with success measured by "intelligence, skill, and cultural knowledge" (Oripeloye, 2024: 1388-89). This requires being fluent in a "geeky 'canon' of texts" that define "gamer" identity, which, as Megan Condis argues, disproportionately reinforces "heteronormative white masculinity" based on expertise and control over technology (Condis, 2016: 4).

But this "idealized masculinity" as described in the OASIS is disclosed as "ultimately unsustainable" and "fragile," (Oripeloye, 2024: 1394) as it is dependent on the "artificiality of the virtual world" (Oripeloye, 2024: 1388). Wade's "reliance on the OASIS as a source of identity and power" underscores its "precariousness" as his "real-world vulnerabilities" contrast sharply with his "virtual success" (Oripeloye, 2024: 1391). The ability to "control over the virtual body" through avatars, while offering temporary "empowerment" ultimately mirrors and re-inscribes the unpalatable social stereotypes rather than setting manacles off citizens free (Oripeloye, 2024: 1393). This "technological escape" from real-world insecurities and emotional pain, while providing a "temporary refuge" can also lead to "entrapment" and "isolation" (Oripeloye, 2024: 1392, 1395) disconnecting individuals from physical and social

realities. True emotional growth, the stories suggest, is only possible outside of these virtual borders, by confronting the complexities of real-life relationships.

## Ender's Game: Play as a Crucible for Identity and Weaponization

In Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game*, the concept of "game" is intrinsically woven into the narrative, serving as the primary mechanism through which Ender Wiggin's identity is shaped and manipulated. Ender is, from the start, a product of genetic engineering, chosen explicitly for a military training programme (Sander, 2013: 83). His being a "Third" is a government-licensed experiment, and his life has been "programmed" as a pre-destined "game" since birth.

In the world of the novel games can be understood as covert training and psychological manipulation. The entire Battle School system is structured around "games". Colonel Graff, the director of Battle School, openly admits to deliberately manipulating Ender's environment to produce a specific outcome: the best military commander. He isolates Ender from the other boys and even nurtures hatred for him because "isolation is — the optimum environment for creativity" (Card, 1994: 115) and that "when the officer prefers you, the others hate you" (Card, 1994: 26). This calculated mental manipulation is part of the "game" meant to make Ender stronger and more determined. The subtraction of Ender's monitor, a device that lets the adults to "watch through his eyes" and "listen through his ears" (Card, 1994: 1), is described as "the final step in your testing to see what would happen if the monitor comes off" (Card, 1994: 15). Graff's cold words that his job is "to produce the best soldiers in the world" (Card, 1994: 27) and "not to be friends" (Card, 1994: 27) screams manipulation in the core of every interaction, reducing each character's relationship with Ender into another piece on the board in Ender's game. With this manipulation Ender's choices become choices under the duress of conscious intent and forced action.

In such circumstance the identity negotiation occurs through physical and digital play. Ender's early physical altercations are immediately reframed within this "game" motif, fundamentally shaping his emerging identity. His savage struggle with Stilson, in which he stomps him relentlessly "viciously," (Card, 1994: 6) after eking out a victory, is seen by Ender as a means to "win this now, and for all time" (Card, 1994: 6). For a sociopathic character, the evidence of this pragmatic ruthlessness contrast with rules of "manly warfare" (Card, 1994: 6) is the military's sign of his potential as indicated by Graff's words, "It isn't what he did...It's why" (Card, 1994: 15). His subsequent showdown with Bonzo Madrid in the shower echoes this: Ender engages in battle with deliberate use of force, knowing that the only way to make the cycle of contending stop is to "hurt Bonzo enough that his fear was stronger than his hate," (Card, 1994: 162) a determination that ultimately results in

Bonzo's death. These times where he physically "fights" serve as violent "game" deciding trials, and solidify his self as a decisive, calculated, and ultimately lethal individual.

The "Giant's Drink" game part of the "Free Play" (Fantasy Game) mind game is an especially significant virtual space for Ender's construction of identity as well as his confrontation with trauma. This computer game, which tests "a child's persistence at this game of despair to determine his level of suicidal need," exemplifies the incredible traumatic impact of Ender's training (Sanders, 2013: 86). Since time and again he is forced to play a rigged game from which he could never emerge alive, Ender rebels against his situation. Rather than selecting either of the poisoned drinks, he opts to "kick one over, then the other, and dodged the Giant's huge hands as the Giant shouted, 'Cheater, cheater!'" and then "dig in the Giant's eye" (Card, 1994: 51).

This act of refusal and "murder" in the game is a forceful refusal to passively accept one's fate, and a strong assertion of the self leading him to "Fairyland," a place "nobody ever comes" (Card, 1994: 51). "Victory," is swiftly followed, however, by intense self-loathing: "I'm a murderer, even when I play. Peter would be proud of me" (Card, 1994: 51). The narrator's framing of Peter's (his cruel brother's) face appearing and dripping blood with a snake's tail coming out of its mouth in the mirror in the video game the End of the World, explicitly connects Ender's violent actions to his worst fear: to become like Peter, his sadistic brother (Card, 1994: 91). It is on the playing field, then, that his submerged terrors and guilt over his role in causing the pain are dredged up in an explicitly horrendous fashion, in which he is made to face his own nascent "killer" persona.

The Battle Room, the primary "play" space for combat training, also serves to develop Ender's persona. He rises to the top when he questions traditional practices, such as falling back on a "feet-first attack position" (Card, 1994: 80) and just "knows" the slippery nature of null gravity. He is forever innovating, and guides his "green army" to unheralded success (Card, 1994: 131). It's during this period that displays the transformation of a bullied child to a respected leader through the use of his superior intellect and strategic genius that he developed from "playing." Then, he's playing a game where the rules are frequently "staked" against him by the teachers, forcing improvisation and creative solutions that reflect the injustice of his experience in the real world. This relentless spawning in of an oppressive and unfair world adds to the psychological tightrope Ender finds himself walking, leading him more and more into the territory of "the end always justifies the means" applying brutal efficiency to his every action, in a climate of constant adaptation. This, however, ironically feeds his traumatic burden.

The culmination of all of this trauma manifests in an ultimate deception, where play is used as a mask for reality. This deep merging of reality and simulation

happens at the peak of the novel. Ender learns that all of his simulated battles, starting from his Command School years, were actually real battles against the Buggers (an alien race). His last "test" where he faces a greater force and employs the "Little Doctor" (a molecular disruption device) to obliterate the Bugger homeworld is not a game but actually the Third Invasion. The devastating truth shatters the illusion of play and leaves Ender with the horrifying understanding that he is a "killer" of unprecedented proportions, guilty of xenocide. Graff's subsequent explanation—that they "tricked" him because someone with "that much compassion could never be the killer we needed"— captures vividly the glaring ethical vacuum resulting from their manipulation (Card, 1994: 230). The "game" was a necessary falsehood to exploit his genius and empathy for the act of xenocide, illustrating how a "gamified world" can turn the innocence of childhood into a weapon.

In a few different ways, Card tries to remove Ender from blame. For one, he does not get put on trial and people say to him "It wasn't your fault" (Sander, 2013: 83). Regardless, Ender does not accept this form of absolution since, in his own words, "all of his crimes weighed heavy on him" (Card, Ender's Game, 1994: 238, also quoted in Sander, 2013: 83). The eventual act of "leaving Peter behind on Earth" and shifting the name "Ender" for "Andrew" represents his attempt to psychologically detach himself from the identity of a Peter-like aggressor (Sander, 2013: 84). Yet, even as the Hive Queen "forgive(s) (Ender and the humans) for our death," Ender himself "cannot" forgive himself, showing how deep his struggles run, despite intent (Sander, 2013: 88). Thus far, his function as "Speaker for the Dead" is to help himself cope with the wounds of his past by trying to understand and articulate the lives and deaths of others (Sander, 2013: 83, 88-89).

## Ready Player One: Play as Escape, Cultural Immersion and Rebellion

Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* depicts a bleak future where the virtual world of OASIS, a "massively multiplayer online game" has progressed into "a new way of life" serving as an "escape for most of humanity" from a heavily dystopian world (Cline, 2011: 1-2, 57). Within this reality, the idea of play serves not only as a means to escape but also an essential cornerstone of existence, a relentless universal game of competition enabling unprecedented power and wealth.

The OASIS offers unrestricted personal liberation providing users the ability to "create an entirely new persona for yourself, with complete control over how you looked and sounded to others" (Cline, 2011: 57). Wade Watts, the protagonist, lives in severe poverty and squalor in the real world, residing in "a vertical maze of trailers" (Cline, 2011: 22). The OASIS grants him an avatar, Parzival, through which he is free to be someone else entirely, unshackled from his flesh-and-bone

limitations. This virtual identity enables him to surpass constraints in his life and participate in a high-stakes "game" which offers the possibility of winning Halliday's fortune and dominion over the OASIS. Freedom provided in the OASIS draws special attention: "your anonymity was guaranteed" (Cline, 2011: 57). Users are allowed to shed their real-life identities and vulnerabilities, fostering self-construction within the digital realm. The OASIS becomes a refuge and an "escape hatch into a better reality" (Cline, 2011: 18): an environment where anything and everything is possible, and wishes can be fulfilled.

The "gamification of identity" is a major theme in the novel in that Wade creates his masculine persona through his digital avatar, Parzival (Oripeloye, 2024: 1387). The OASIS is based on a competitive gaming culture in which avatars complete challenges, quests, and puzzles in order to achieve mastery. Between its virtual gaze, success in its virtual universe is measured by intelligence, skill, and cultural knowledge, and serves as a way of reinforcing the ideal of competitive, performance-based masculinity (Oripeloye, 2024: 1389). Wade's progressions as a "gunter" (egg hunter) in search of Halliday's Easter egg serves as a "hero's journey" and a "rite of passage," which correlates his masculinity with capabilities of outwitting and outcompeting his competitors, both individual rivals and the corporate behemoth IOI (Oripeloye, 2024: 1389). The competitively driven society is a continuation of an ideology of traditional masculinity which requires and necessitates that in order to not just survive but succeed, an individual must outperform others (Condis qtd in Oripeloye, 2024: 1389). Yet the novel critiques dependence on technology and virtual bodies as a way of escaping real-world insecurities, even as it recognizes that this escape may offer a temporary empowerment but will "hinder personal growth and reinforce unhealthy coping mechanisms" (Oripeloye, 2024: 1393). And this is what makes the performance of hyper-masculinity in OASIS fundamentally unsustainable: it depends on the artifice of digital reality to be held together (Oripeloye, 2024: 1389).

The "Hunt for Halliday's Easter egg" captures the imagination of people concerning 1980s pop culture. It effectively demonstrates the prejudices and inclinations of its creator, James Halliday. Wade (Parzival) spends his life trying to master these cultural phenomena, stating that "after five long years, the Copper Key had finally been found, by an eighteen-year-old kid living in a trailer park on the outskirts of Oklahoma City. That kid was me" (Cline, 2011: 9). "The harder a game was to beat, the more I enjoyed it. And as I played these ancient digital relics, night after night, year after year, I discovered I had a talent for them" (Cline, 2011: 64). Halliday serves as the "dungeon master" throughout the quest, which is figuratively referred to as a "Dungeons & Dragons module" writ large (Cline, 2011: 66). This illustrates the intense immersion in retro culture, which in this instance serves as a tool for identity formation.

Wade defines himself based on his understanding of the past, and Halliday's journal and *Anorak's Almanac* act as the "Bible" for solving the puzzles. As a result, the text's significance supports the notion that this particular culture is essential. The *Adventure* Easter egg, the *Tomb of Horrors* D&D module, and the *WarGames* film are just a few examples of the games and cultural allusions that contain the key clues. As a "game" mechanic, a player must possess both gaming skills and cultural literacy in Halliday's selected era.

The novel itself is designed as a "ludic novel" that "requires game-playing and puzzle-solving of readers," immersing them in intertextual references and riddles (Condis, 2016: 2). Devoted fans are encouraged to achieve "100% completion" by seeking out and mastering the referenced works (Condis, 2016: 4). This "geek canon" tends to highlight and support "heteronormative white masculinity." It shows how, historically, those backgrounds dominated early gaming culture, particularly among college-educated men (Condis, 2016: 4).

The novel's "Flicksyncs," where players literally perform lead parts from movies like *WarGames* (1983) and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975), explicitly reward accurate reproduction of characters' dialogue, accents, and gestures, especially those mimicking "young, straight, white male protagonists" (Condis, 2016: 12). Engaging in this way helps create a more inclusive (even participatory) memory of culture, pushing back against the postmodern idea that there's a gap in our historical understanding.

The contest in *Ready Player One* is not merely a game; it carries "life-and-death stakes". The appearance of the Sixers, a corporate entity (IOI) whose "sole purpose is to exploit loopholes in the contest rules and subvert the intention of Jim's will" (Cline, 2011: 118), brings about an explicit ethical conflict. The Sixers use "hacked immersion rigs" and "support teams" to gain an unfair advantage, reflecting on a moral corruption that can infest a gamified world when real-world stakes are introduced (Cline, 2011: 156).

Parzival's journey turns him from a loner into a leader. He chooses to "wage war against the entire Sixer army" by uniting "every single gunter on the grid" (Cline, 2011: 309). What is impressive is his transformation from a relatively passive user to an active agent in deciding OASIS' future, and by extension, their own. These virtual battles are brought to life as actual acts of resistance and liberation. Wade's most galvanizing action in the film adaptation (and, for inheriting the OASIS) is the following: he goes back into the real world, seeks out love, in turn, he closes the server two days a week because he wants people to live for real in the real world. This is a significant change from being indifferent to the physical world and the others in the beginning, and now he is contributing to and formulating healthier and more grounded revolutionist-like use of technology for everyone. It is a movement

from passively watching a codified game to an active agency that can affect both virtual and off-line cultures.

## Comparative Analysis: Blurring Boundaries and Emerging Agency

Both *Ender's Game* and *Ready Player One* effectively deploy game and play as a motif to address identity formation, coping with trauma, and the move to empowerment in the gamified sphere; they are not, however, doing the same thing.

Both novels examine the pleasures and complexities of play and the consciousness of a self in the world, yet they differ in their staging and situating of the boundary between game and reality. Two theories—the "magic circle" of Huizinga and a critique of that concept by Calleja— are specifically useful here. In *Ender's Game*, the game world is sequestered carefully (Ender is tricked into thinking his simulations are benign), adhering to Huizinga's concept of an isolated, distinct "magic circle." In contrast, *Ready Player One* embodies Calleja's claim that digital games do not feature such a strict border; rather, the permeable relation between the real and the virtual is naturalized and even wanted. These disparate treatments of permeability between play and reality not only shape the characters' emotional growth, but also bring to light the larger social-ethical consequences of digital submersion.

In *Ender's Game*, the line between game and life is a secret at first, a treacherous subterfuge unveiled as the climactic revelation so that Ender is compelled to confront the incalculable carnage with which his "victories" are associated. From the moment he is born, his whole years growing up is a lie created to develop a weapon and to find that out is cause for intense mental stress. In *Ready Player One*, the barrier is not immediately penetrable, but users also consciously decide to go to a digital reality that ends up becoming their primary reality, not just because the real world is an unlivable dystopia, but also because in the virtual world they can actually have power and pleasure. The OASIS provides a sense of fulfillment, it is almost indistinguishable from physical reality, and whatever is won during Halliday's quest it directly influences real-world power and wealth. This sums up a fundamental difference: one world uses games to conceal reality, the other uses games to supplant it.

The reduction of permeability or shading-off of the boundary between game and life as seen in these texts has far-reaching implications for the way trauma is produced and incorporated. Turning to Cathy Caruth's trauma theory we can observe Ender's trauma as the belated recognition whereby Ender's "play" has had actual consequences—his nightmares and self-hatred are an effect of an experience not fully taken in at the moment of its occurrence. For Wade, however, the trauma comes before the game; it is a part of his lived material circumstances — poverty,

neglect, environment collapse. His withdrawal to the OASIS becomes an escape valve as well as a crucible in which he reinvents himself. Accordingly, the games in each novel work in different ways with trauma: in *Ender's Game*, games induce trauma; in *Ready Player One*, games are the realm through which trauma is worked through.

Indeed, in *Ender's Game* "play" is involves trauma from the very beginning; each "win" in the game becomes a step closer to identifying Ender with the persona of a "killer," and, the joyless success pushes Ender deeper and deeper into psychological and moral turmoil. His nightmares are the literal result of the violence that happens in his "games", and he's forced to feel guilty for it while everyone else denies what's happening. For Wade in *Ready Player One*, the OASIS and the Hunt are an escape from an already-traumatic reality (poverty, parental death, and the world falling apart). Though his digital persona, Parzival, gives him strength and temporary relief from the world's problems, the outside world and the interferences from IOI still work their way in, having real-life consequences (such as his home being destroyed) either way. Both protagonists work through trauma by playing games, but in Ender's case the trauma is *inflicted* by the games, whereas Wade's trauma is *alleviated* or *channeled* by them, illustrating two different ways in which the ludic and the traumatic can relate.

The link between game and trauma in Ender's Game can also be fruitfully understood in terms of gamified adolescence, where the context for emotional development is not support, but weaponization. The conditions of the Battle School constitute a variety of ludic panopticon where every moment of play is also a test of utility, value and obedience. It's not just trauma that Ender is negotiating; he is made to personify a militarized form of selfhood within an intensely surveilled game system. His identity is formed not in a natural way, but through high performance under constant stress. His recursive execution of a game involves actions are performed under the pressure of a threat. This enforced "play" is an echo of Cathy Caruth's understanding of trauma as a "repetition that defies narrative," as Ender repeats violence without being offered the space to engage with it (Caruth, 1996: 7–8). Instead of serving as respite or therapeutic simulation, the ludic space in *Ender's Game* becomes a traumatic feedback loop — a vicious rite of passage without consent. Thus, while Ender and Wade may both undergo a process of personal growth and change through play, in *Ender's Game* we can more fully see the price to be paid for institutionalized games and their use to manipulate, rather than facilitate, adolescent identity construction.

But trauma is not the sole marker of the protagonists' arcs. Both stories describe a transition from psychological disconnection to the coming-into-being of an agent of change—punctuated by effective ethical decision-making up inside gamified systems. This echoes Bernard Suits's idea of the lusory attitude (that we

can choose, accept game rules, one of the basic condition to play meaningfully) and the idea of Ehrmann that players are not only agents, but can also be "played" by the system. In *Ender's Game*, Ender fights the system at first within its bounds, but later he manipulates it and goes beyond it, thus asserting his autonomy. Wade also transitions from passive fandom to ethical leader, and from a reclusively solo existence, eschewing the exploitative corporate lack of identity that permeates the OASIS. These in-game decisions also show how gamified spaces paradoxically both restrict and facilitate ethical development.

Both novels portray digital spaces as battlegrounds of moral choices. Ender repeatedly makes choices within the game and he seems to ignore and/or break rules, as well as go against principles (e.g., kicking Stilson while down, killing the Giant). His actions, while morally grey and leave him riddled with guilt, are portrayed as "killing for the sake of survival or ultimate victory," emphasizing the necessity of the morally grey thinking his environment enforces on him. He progresses from a boy who so readily follows orders to a leader who must learn to disobey them tactically, such as his manipulation of Bonzo's authority. Similarly, Wade's quest brings him face to face with the villainous machinations of IOI, and rather than abiding their unscrupulous business tactics he recruits a team of like-minded "gunters" to preserve the "honor of Jim's game" and defend the soul of the OASIS. This active resistance – fueled by what is at stake in the virtual world – is a compelling indication of his growing agency, thus demonstrating more meaningful and emergent action can take place in and through games.

## Conclusion

*Ender's Game* and *Ready Player One* deploy the motifs of game and play not just as narrative devices in themselves but as ontological and ethical paradigms that bring about determining the main characters' change/evolution from players who are played upon into active agents themselves. By reconciling theoretical concepts such as Huizinga's magic circle, Ehrmann's cultural performativity of play, Calleja flexibility of the game/reality binary, and Caruth's concept of trauma as unassimilated experience, one can safely assert that the novels demonstrate how ludic structures function as mediators of identity, trauma and ethical becoming. In *Ender's Game*, the enclosed simulation with its deferred effects makes blatant the game of weaponized innocence and the moral obscenity of manipulation. In *Ready Player One*, the OASIS's open virtuality makes it difficult to distinguish play from life at day one, meditating on the pleasures and perils of digital immersive culture from the get-go.

These speculative fables reach past escapism to assert that games aren't merely escapist; they are on the vanguard of how we as individuals grapple with loss, create significance and imagine new types of life. The heroes' transformations

from victimization to empowerment, from social isolation to collective purpose, from virtual immersion to analog activism, reflect broader cultural anxieties concerning teenagers, tech and moral culpability in a gamified society.

By placing game mechanics at the heart of their protagonists' formation, both novels reveal how a gamified adolescence reconceives the classical Bildungsroman in a technologically saturated world. Play is no longer a boundary that separates childhood from adulthood, but it is the very condition of coming of age. In these stories, play is not a mode of behavior — it's an ontology — a medium of being, knowing and acting. Furthermore, the already embedded references to pop culture, simulation, and subcultural cachet, generate an *active cultural memory* in this outlet through its *interactive dimension* that ask readers to take part in the ethical and aesthetic bequests of the past and present. These ideas begin to reconcile theory and story, and advocate for speculative fiction as an essential means to reframe identity, trauma, and ethical agency in a culture more and more ludic, and more and more mediated.

They ultimately show that play is not an escape from reality, but a generative being-in-the world, in which new identities are produced, cultural memories are preserved, and ethical selves are imagined. In our hypermediated world, play — whether onscreen or in story — still feels to me one of the most essential tools of survival, resistance, and change.

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