Gay Habits Set Straight: Fan Culture and Authoritative Praxis in *Ready Player One*

Kevin Moberly, Old Dominion University
Brent Moberly, Indiana University

Gwendolyn Morgan reminds us that medievalism and authority are complementary fictions.[1] Recognizing that the "past with which we identify actually reflects our present needs," she examines the way that contemporary writers establish the authority of their works by adapting, if not explicitly fabricating medieval sources.[2] The result, she argues, is a kind of "double practice of medievalism," one that invokes the authoritative power of the Middle Ages by appropriating the medieval appeal to *auctoritee*, which is to say the pretense of "citing real and invented classical authorities" to both disguise and justify authorial invention.[3] Morgan thus proposes an arguably operational approach to medievalism. Grounded in an emphasis on praxis, Morgan attempts to come to terms with the "somewhat slippery" ways in which the medieval manifests itself in mass culture and academia by asking what the medieval authorizes.[4] In so doing, she broaches the larger question of how the medieval works to legitimize the "ideology and the practices of the culture making the appeal."[5]

In this essay we employ Morgan's approach to interrogate the way that the medieval appears—which is to say, operates—in Ernest Cline's 2011 novel, *Ready Player One*.[6] Although set in the dystopian near future, *Ready Player One* engages readers in a nostalgic return to the 1980s via its socially-awkward protagonist, seventeen-year-old Wade Owen Watts. Penniless and with few prospects for the future, Wade retreats to the OASIS, an immense, game-like simulation that offers users a refuge from the deprivations of an ongoing energy crisis. There, he finds his vocation as "Parzival," one of millions of "Gunters" or "egg-hunters" searching for the "Holy Grail" (28) of the OASIS: an "Easter Egg" that will grant its finder full control of the simulation. *Ready Player One* is, in this regard, a surprisingly medievalist undertaking. Fascinated with its own past, it is not only constructed through numerous allusions to medievalist films and computer games, but as Susan Aronstein and Jason Thompson demonstrate, explicitly borrows its narrative structure from Arthurian romance.[7] Describing the novel as a "Grail tale for the Twitter-PS4-Wii generation masquerading as a postmodern techno-bildungsroman," they argue that *Ready Player One* eschews its cyber-utopian trappings in favor of an older Arthurian tradition, one that is articulated through

---

[1] See Gwendolyn Morgan, *The Invention of False Medieval Authorities as a Literary Device in Popular Fiction: From Tolkien to* The Da Vinci Code (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2006); "Medievalism, Authority, and the Academy," in *Studies in Medievalism XVII: Defining Medievalism(s)*, ed. Karl Fugelso (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2009), 55-67; and "Authority," in *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*, eds. Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2014), 27-33.

[2] Morgan, *Invention*, 3.

[3] Morgan, "Academy," 56.

[4] Morgan, "Academy," 55.

[5] Morgan, "Authority," 27.

[6] Ernest Cline, *Ready Player One* (New York: Random House, 2011). Parenthetical citations refer to the page on which the citation occurs.

[7] Susan Aronstein and Jason Thompson, "Coding the Grail: *Ready Player One's* Arthurian Mash-Up," *Arthuriana* 25.4 (2015): 51-65.

Wade's journey "from inside to outside, from cyberspace to landscape, from digital body to physical body, from 'flickering signifier' to humanist individual …"[8]

We argue, however, that *Ready Player One* rehearses a familiar medievalist storyline above and beyond that which Aronstein and Thompson identify. As with L. Frank Baum's *Wizard of Oz,* it sends its hero into a fantastically whimsical world in order to redeem an external reality that is constructed as somehow more serious and therefore more real. Although the success of this endeavor depends on the hero's almost-chivalric ability to play and adapt, it paradoxically results in a situation in which play is no longer possible. The medieval, in this sense, is explicitly identified with an imagined, impossible childhood that incorporates in embryonic form anxieties over the fraught potentiality of fan culture within established regimes of media production. As the embodiment of these anxieties, Wade functions within the novel to initiate readers into what, following Gilles Deleuze, Julian Kücklich describes as the "deregulated subjectivity" through which the queer potentials of fan culture can be disciplined via the immaterial labor of its participants.[9] Furthermore, we argue that *Ready Player One* accomplishes this through the authoritative mechanics that constitute, according to Morgan, the book-lover's mystery: reading strategies that, as she writes, implicate readers into a recursive search for "suppressed truths hidden in closely guarded texts."[10] As with the didactic, Arthurian-themed works for young boys that proliferated at the start of the last century, what results is not escape but interpellation: the wholesale sublimation of potentially deviant forms of subject construction into prescribed, which is to say, heteronormative channels.

* * *

As Henry Jenkins observes, fan culture has become a potent force in contemporary popular culture.[11] Emblematic of the liberatory potentials of digital high technology to challenge the underlying power relationships that characterize traditional media, it offers an antidote to a media landscape that has become increasingly consolidated into a handful of transnational corporations. Fan culture, however, also represents a tremendous asset to these corporations. As Kücklich writes about "modding," or modifying commercial computer games, fan culture can increase the longevity of transmedia franchises, supplement their offerings, generate marketing or reference materials, and perform other tasks that would otherwise require additional corporate resources.[12] The result is a pernicious "form of unpaid labor," or what Kücklich terms "playbour," one that is paradoxically perpetuated through (and perpetuates) the belief that play is a fundamentally unproductive activity.[13] As with other types of fan production, modding represents what Kücklich and Tiziana Terranova

---

[8] Ibid., 51, 53.

[9] Julian Kücklich, "Precarious Playbour: Modders and the Digital Games Industry," *The Fibreculture Journal* 5 (2005), http://five.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-025-precarious-playbour-modders-and-the-digital-games-industry/.

[10] Morgan, *Invention,* 34.

[11] Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

[12] Kücklich, "Playbour."

[13] Ibid.

characterize as the contradictions inherent in immaterial labor. "Simultaneously voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited," it at once challenges and affirms the otherwise sovereign boundaries between work and play, consumption and production, and any number of other modernist binaries.[14]

Understood in this sense, fan production embodies what Carolyn Dinshaw describes as the queer potential of the amateur. As she writes, the terms "amateur" and "queer" are "mutually reinforcing" in the sense that to be an amateur is to work outside and against the disciplinary ideologies that simultaneously empower and constrain professional or scientific experts.[15] As she explains, "amateurism's operation outside, or beside, the culture of professionalism provides an opening of potentials otherwise foreclosed. . . . It offers . . . 'another type of knowledge,' as Barthes puts it— different ways of knowing and sources of knowledge, and even . . . a consequent broadening of the public sphere."[16] As an embodiment of these tensions, fan culture thus represents something of a double-edged sword. On one hand, it promises to revitalize otherwise staid, risk-averse institutions by harnessing the seemingly boundless enthusiasm of those most invested in them. On the other, this very enthusiasm threatens to destabilize these institutions: to disrupt or, as Dinshaw hopes, queer the socio-economic and political relationships through which they traditionally exercise power over participants.

Ready Player One dramatizes these anxieties primarily through the examples of James Halliday and Ogden Morrow, the odd-couple, co-founders of Gregarious Simulations, the company responsible for maintaining the OASIS. Compared to "Jobs and Wozniak or Lennon and McCartney" (53), Ogden and Morrow represent the ideal of the fan-entrepreneur: "early adopters" and "elite consumers," as Jenkins puts it, who possess the technological wherewithal to leverage their passions into new forms of expression.[17] Yet while Halliday's and Morrow's associations with fan culture affirm their status as innovators in what Megan Condis describes as the predominantly masculine gaming culture of the OASIS, they simultaneously prevent them from participating in the reproductive economy of the novel's real world.[18] This is perhaps most evident with Halliday himself. At once enabled and handicapped by his almost-autistic "obsession with the 1980s, the decade during which he'd been a teenager" (2), he embodies the pathological sense of "attachment in a detached world" that Dinshaw associates with the amateur.[19] Constructed by his "abjections from the normative modernist life course," Halliday eschews the formal, periodized rhythms of school and work in favor of a fantasy constructed largely in the idealized image of the normalized,

---

[14] Tiziana Terranova, "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy," *Social Text* 18.2 (2000): 33, quoted in Kücklich, "Playbour."

[15] Carolyn Dinshaw, *How Soon is Now: Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

[16] Ibid., 24.

[17] Jenkins, *Convergence Culture,* 23.

[18] Megan Condis, "Playing the Game of Literature: *Ready Player One*, the Ludic Novel, and the Geeky 'Canon' of White Masculinity," *Journal of Modern Literature* 39.2 (2016):8-9.

[19] Dinshaw, *How Soon is Now*, 31.

suburban childhood he was never allowed to enjoy.[20] As readers learn, he is so "socially inept" (53) that he is almost entirely unable to communicate with women. The exception is Kira Underwood, a British exchange student who joins the pair's regular *Dungeons & Dragons* sessions in Morrow's basement. A "quintessential geek girl" (119), she shares many of Halliday's obsessions, but Halliday can only speak to her "in a relaxed manner" while roleplaying and only then "in character, as Anorak,… address[ing] her as Leucosia, the name of her D and D character" (120).

Morrow does not fare much better. Arguably the most professional character in the novel, he marries Kira and subsequently disentangles himself from Halliday, Gregarious Simulations, and the OASIS in favor of the real-world of the novel, where he and Kira commit themselves to what Dinshaw describes as the "serious, fully developed social business of family reproduction."[21] Yet as Dinshaw writes about amateurs in general, Morrow is ultimately queered by his desire to escape— which is to say, his desire for a heteronormative relationship with Kira. This becomes clear at the end of the novel, when readers learn that Halliday's "overwhelming jealousy" (325) over Morrow's marriage to Kira precipitates Morrow's break from the company. As Morrow explains:

> Like me, he'd been in love with her since high school. Of course, he never had the courage to act on it. So she never knew how he felt about her. And neither did I. He didn't tell me about it until the last time I spoke to him, right before he died. (325)

As this passage reveals, Morrow's relationship with Kira is also a relationship with Halliday, one that is constructed through what Eve Sedgwick describes as the homosocial / erotic politics of the love triangle: an "erotic rivalry" in which, as she writes, the "bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved."[22] Accordingly, it functions as a pretext of sorts, an excuse for a long-repressed acknowledgment of the strength of the homosocial bonds between two estranged but ultimately inseparable friends—an acknowledgment that can only be made after both Kira and Halliday have passed away.

Morrow and Halliday thus embody the central paradox that confronts the medievalist amateurs that Dinshaw describes. Constructed in the mirror image of one another, they are queered both by the shared obsessions that affirm their status as "mega-geeks" and by their shared desire for Kira— which is to say, their homosocial desire for each other as it is simultaneously expressed and contained through their rivalry over her. "Ever and only" allowed to be amateurs, even in their ostensibly heteronormative relations with Kira, both Halliday and Morrow withdraw from society, abandoning their professional obligations in favor of a return to the kind of fantastic and arguably,

---

[20] Ibid., 31.
[21] Ibid., 32.
[22] Eve Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 21.

medievalist endeavors that inspired their successes as adolescents.[23] Exiled from the real and the heteronormative, they are consigned to a kind of simulated, asexual reproduction via the very digital technologies that once empowered them. They therefore embody one of the central anxieties of fan culture—the fear that the passions that inspire fans to distinguish themselves as "early adopters" and "elite consumers" also mark them as queer, foreclosing any possibility of meaningful participation in the heteronormative relations that are imagined as reproducing value in the so-called real world.[24]

* * *

Ready Player One resolves this anxiety in the same way that it broaches it, via the expedient of an erotic triangle between its primary characters, Wade, Aech and Art3mis. Presented as amateurs in the making, they loosely reprise the roles that Halliday, Morrow, and Kira played in the original triangle. Like Halliday, Wade is a technological savant, but so shy that he finds it almost impossible to interact meaningfully with women outside the OASIS (31). Aech, by contrast, is identified with Morrow. A natural organizer, he enjoys a semi-professional career as a gamer, one that affords him the resources to establish the "Basement" (37), a chat room for elite gunters that "perfectly" (151) recreates Morrow's basement and is even haunted by Morrow's avatar (312). For her part, Art3mis reprises Kira's role as the "quintessential geek girl" (119) as it is often articulated in popular culture—a sexually desirable young woman who shares her boyfriend's passion for computer games, yet is not skilled enough to challenge his dominance over her.

Art3mis thus disrupts the otherwise normal, homosocial relationship between Wade and Aech. Wade, for example, constructs his feelings for Aech as a lesser though not necessarily different degree of attraction to Art3mis. "I'd never felt such an instant connection with another person, in the real world or in the OASIS," he states, "Not even with Aech" (92). He registers a similarly doubled jealousy when Art3mis, and Aech meet for first time. "I didn't want Art3mis to like Aech, or vice versa," he tells readers, "I wanted her all to myself" (151). As his use of the qualifier "or vice versa" reveals, Wade is as concerned with having Art3mis "all to myself" as he is with having Aech "all to myself," two mutually exclusive possibilities that become equally impossible following their introduction.

Art3mis thus queers Wade's relationship with Aech in much the same way that Kira queers Halliday's relationship with Morrow. Following Sedgwick, Art3mis' presence between Wade and Aech foregrounds the degree to which their "bonds of 'rivalry' and 'love,' however differently experienced, are equally powerful and in many senses equivalent."[25] Understood in this sense, Wade's attraction for Art3mis does not affirm his heteronormativity, but foregrounds the strength of his otherwise prohibited feelings for Aech. Moreover, it explicitly raises a possibility that is never

[23] Dinshaw, *How Soon is Now,* 32.
[24] Jenkins, *Convergence Culture,* 21.
[25] Sedgwick, *Between Men,* 21.

even hinted at in the triangular relationship between Halliday, Morrow, and Kira—that Wade, Aech, and Art3mis might be gay. The novel makes this suggestion repeatedly, reminding readers that for all of her digital allure, Art3mis "might actually be some middle-aged dude named Chuck, with back hair and male-pattern baldness" (35).

Wade's heteronormativity is ultimately (and paradoxically) affirmed by the revelation that Aech is homosexual: an African-American lesbian passing as a white male to avoid discrimination online. As Condis writes, this revelation is at once significant and insignificant.[26] Coming as it does from arguably the most masculine character in the novel, it ostensibly serves as a reminder that gaming culture might not be as white or heteronormative as the novel's canon of pop-culture allusions suggests. At the same time, though, Aech's revelation has no lasting impact on the plot. As Condis points out, Wade continues to refer to her as masculine within the space of the OASIS, a decision that he justifies by telling readers that "her avatar was still male" (330).[27] Moreover, Aech's revelation does not require any of the novel's characters to rethink their assumptions about gender, sexuality, or race. In fact, Wade ultimately greets Aech's declared homosexuality with relief, telling readers that he "wasn't all that surprised, really. Over the past few years, Aech and I had discussed our mutual admiration for the female form on numerous occasions. I was actually relieved to know that Aech hadn't been deceiving me, at least not on that account" (321). As Condis observes, Wade "essentially stuffs [Aech's] body back into the virtual closet for the sake of his own comfort, thereby verifying Aech's theory that she must hide herself to make and keep friends in the OASIS."[28] Aech's declaration of sexuality is, in this sense, little more than a convenient plot device. Neutralized almost as soon as it is made, it normalizes the erotic politics of the triangular relationship between Wade, Art3mis, and Aech; it recasts the equivalent "bonds of 'rivalry' and 'love'" that bind Wade to Aech via Art3mis, proving that Wade has never been anything but heteronormative despite (and perhaps because of) Aech's deception.[29]

* * *

Aech's coming out exonerates Wade, marking him as blameless and thereby clearing the way for what is arguably the penultimate revelation of the novel, Halliday's admonishment that "reality is *real*" (364), delivered just before he disappears from the OASIS for good. Readers quickly realize, however, that what Halliday means by the *real* is not really the real, but the heteronormative. The novel makes this point clear in its conclusion when Wade abandons the OASIS for "true happiness" (364) in the form of Art3mis, who waits for him in the flesh at the center of a hedge maze that, as Aronstein and Thompson note, is "both a natural remediation of the labyrinth in *Adventure* and a

---

[26] Condis, "Playing," 15.
[27] Ibid., 15.
[28] Ibid., 15.
[29] Sedgwick, *Between Men,* 21.

nod to Chrétien de Troyes' *Erec et Enide*."[30] As her positioning suggests, Art3mis stands in as the real-world equivalent of Halliday's virtual Easter egg; she is the true Grail, the just reward for what Aronstein and Thompson describe as Wade's Percival-like transformation into a "Grail knight in real life as well as in the game."[31] Accordingly, her symbolic (and erotic) apprehension by Wade at the end of the novel is crucial to achieving what Aronstein and Thompson describe as the novel's "Edenic" though "hackneyed" ending—the strong suggestion that the couple will "harness their economic resources and personal talents to improve the condition of those around them, to make the world . . . a better place."[32]

Yet as Aronstein and Thompson also point out, "Halliday's departing aphorism 'reality is real'" is predicated on a second, less explicit revelation: the recognition that the "OASIS is false."[33] Pointing to the novel's concluding sentence—Wade's declaration that for the "first time in as long as I could remember, I had absolutely no desire to log back into the OASIS" (372)—they read this recognition as a larger "rejection of the techno-fetishism of modern US culture" in favor of truths "found in the very narratives that the world of the game seems to reject as absurd: the old tales of the king, the Grail, and the worthy knights who heal the land.[34] Cline's novel, however, never entirely repudiates its faith in digital high technology, not even as perverted by the OASIS. Wade, for example, does not turn off the OASIS, even when Halliday's avatar reveals the "Big Red Button" (364) that will permanently shut down the simulation. Nor can he remain in Art3mis's embrace forever. While Wade's victory in the egg hunt signals the end of the game, it also marks the beginning of his professional career. As the newly ordained head of Gregarious Simulations, he must eventually face the executives and lawyers who, as Morrow points out, now work for him (369).

Read in this light, *Ready Player One* is as much a novel about escape as it is about assimilation or, perhaps more accurately, appropriation. As Condis argues, it is overwhelmingly concerned with the question of how gaming culture can be integrated into the mainstream via the gamification of its discursive practices.[35] The novel thus conflates progress with professionalization. Following Dinshaw's schema, it explicitly associates Wade's "timely" emergence as a professional and a reformer with his renunciation of everything that is imagined to be unreal or, as she might write, queer, about the way that fan culture misappropriates the otherwise positivistic potentials of digital high technology. Wade's victory is, in this sense, not a triumph over and certainly not a rejection of technology. It is instead a rejection of what the novel represents as his unnatural relationship to technology—the type of masturbatory fantasy that almost leads him to abandon his quest for the egg in favor of "humping a lubed-up robot": the "Shaptic ÜberBetty" (193) he purchases after his virtual relationship with Art3mis falters.

---

[30] Aronstein and Thompson, "Coding," 63.
[31] Ibid., 58.
[32] Ibid., 63.
[33] Ibid., 63.
[34] Ibid., 63.
[35] Condis, "Playing," 3-4.

This point becomes clear when one recognizes that, as a technology, the OASIS is constructed through two intersecting though, in some ways, antithetical versions of fan production. Although the OASIS embodies what Jenkins describes as the open source potential of fan culture to repurpose and thereby create value from existing media properties, it is also an impossibly queer place.[36] Imagined as a heterogeneous assortment of presents, each seemingly more fantastic than the last, the OASIS is simultaneously celebrated and condemned as an escapist endeavor; it is, as Morrow puts it, "a self-imposed prison for humanity" (120). Yet as Dinshaw points out, such critiques mask a more complex reality, namely that nostalgia is not simply a "yearning for an idealized past as escape from a present felt to be dismal and unpromising," but often functions as a "much needed survival strategy for those for whom a relationship to 'home' is disrupted: those displaced from their homelands, either literally or figuratively, including queers of all stripes."[37] As an "escape hatch into a better reality" (18), the OASIS offers the displaced masses a wonderland of simulated excess and opportunities, one that allows the painfully awkward to masquerade as socially proficient, and, as in Aech's case, the queer to pass as white and straight in explicitly male-dominated arenas.

In doing so, however, the OASIS negates the procreative potentials that are conflated with progress in the novel's real-world. The mechanics of the virtual, as Wade and Art3mis discover to their dismay, preclude the possibility of physical intimacy, rendering their otherwise promising heterosexual relationship fruitless. As Tison Pugh writes about Baum's Oz series, the OASIS is a decidedly "queer utopia"—a "fairyland where magic brings happiness and contentment to all of its citizens, despite the peculiarities of their gendered identities in regard to constructions of heteronormativity," but which is also made barren by this same magic.[38] Guarded by the "Great and Powerful Og" (180), as Morrow's avatar is known, the OASIS arguably represents a high-tech version of Oz. As an explicit metaphor for anxieties about the queer (and implicitly queering) ways that fans repurpose mass culture through digital high technology, its paradoxically productive sterility foregrounds the question of how to reproduce the means of reproduction: how to take advantage of the creative and economic potentials of fan culture while simultaneously mitigating tendencies that are imagined as being antithetical or at least disruptive to the hegemonic and heteronormative business of progress.

Cline ultimately proposes a pedagogical solution to this dilemma: a "reading exercise," that, as Condis writes, follows a "syllabus" of "canonical" geek texts that imagines "gaming subculture as almost exclusively white and male," privileging identification over critical inquiry.[39] Aronstein and

---

[36] Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 256.
[37] Dinshaw, *How Soon is Now*, 34-35.
[38] Tison Pugh, "'There lived in the Land of Oz two queerly made men': Queer Utopianism and Antisocial Eroticism in L. Frank Baum's Oz Series," *Marvels & Tales: Journal of Fairy-Tale Studies* 22.2 (2008): 218, 227.
[39] Condis, "Playing," 6, 9-11.

Thompson make a similar argument, though they contend that Wade's "re-education" follows an older (but arguably no less white nor male) Arthurian syllabus.[40] "Ludic areté" and "insider knowledge," as Aronstein and Thompson write, "only go so far."[41] Wade's transition from "gunter to Grail knight" depends on his ability to "read the world anew" and ultimately reject the OASIS as "a digital illusion, an 'enchantment' that dupes the knight/hero," embracing in its stead his identity as "Parzival" in the more authentic Arthurian meta-narrative that structures Halliday's contest.[42]

It is also, however, possible to approach Cline's novel in terms of what Morgan describes as the book-lover's mystery. Popularized by Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, the booklover's mystery centers upon the existence of a rare text that attests to some dark or otherwise compelling "truth" that challenges "certain spiritual faith or moral absolutism."[43] This text is often of ancient, if not medieval, origin and is often conspicuously absent, though clues to its whereabouts and contents exist in other works or libraries.[44] The missing text inevitably becomes the subject of some larger conspiracy, and its ultimate recovery often entails its destruction, lest its contents destabilize some wider and generally-accepted truth.[45] As Morgan observes, the book-lover's mystery promotes an expressly empiricist hermeneutics, fetishizing the text as the locus of ancient *auctoritee* while simultaneously imagining it as ultimately intelligible to modern rationality.[46]

Ready Player One gamifies the book-lover's mystery, establishing Halliday's "Easter egg" (5) as a virtual proxy for the genre's other conspicuously absent texts. In keeping with the genre, the egg's value lies more in its function than its content: it is literally and figuratively code, an explicit intervention that troubles the established order and sets into motion a series of traumatic events. Accordingly, the egg is represented as an expressly medieval artifact, the product of Halliday as the dark wizard Anorak laboring for over a decade "in a medieval library, hunched over a scarred worktable, mixing potions and poring over dusty spell books" (7).

While Anorak's egg revitalizes the OASIS, it does so by converting it into the explicitly errant space of medieval romance: a version of the 1979 Atari game *Adventure* but one lacking both a walkthrough and, worse yet, the will to create one. Prior to the egg hunt, the OASIS represented an open endeavor; as Halliday's most "popular videogame" (5) it was a library of puzzles *and* solutions, a vast, free repository of "the collected knowledge, art, and amusements of all of human civilization" (16) and, as such, represented an inherently rational counter to organized religion and other varieties of "dark ages nonsense" (16) as Wade puts it. The hunt, however, queers the OASIS; as a kind of

---

[40] Aronstein and Thompson, "Coding," 59.
[41] Ibid., 59.
[42] Ibid., 59-60.
[43] Morgan, *Invention*, 34.
[44] Ibid., 34.
[45] Ibid., 34.
[46] Ibid., 30.

return of the repressed, it renders the simulation into a conspiratorial space where even the forces of good are mired in "bravado, bullshit, and pointless infighting" (23).

This inversion adheres to the conventions of the book-lover's mystery, which posits the past as a mystical, if not sinister presence but gradually reveals it to be inherently legible to those with the requisite skillsets.[47] Perhaps the best example of this narrative strategy comes in the final obstacle of the quest—the crystal gate that functions as the threshold into what Aronstein and Thompson describe as Wade's ascension to his Arthurian throne.[48] Inscribed with the words "Charity," "Hope," and "Faith" (306), the gate resonates with allegorical potential, recalling, as the novel admits, First Corinthians 13:13, which establishes faith, hope, and charity as the three theological virtues. Not only have the theological virtues long been associated with the chivalric, but the preceding verses in First Corinthians 13—which liken the journey into faith to the transition from childhood to adulthood—also seem to speak to the gate's role in the novel's overarching narrative trajectory as the final exit from the childlike environs of the OASIS into the more fraught realities of adulthood.

As a reading test, though, the crystal gate proves to be deceptively literal. Its solution lies not in the complexities of medieval exegesis, which the novel explicitly rejects as the province of Sorrento and the other "morons" (307) who trouble the OASIS, but from the key phrase "it takes three" from the second verse of Bob Dorough's 1973 song "Three is the Magic Number"—a clue that the gate can only be opened by three players with three crystal keys.[49] Dorough's song represents an Easter egg in and of itself, ultimately validating the novel's yearning for the nuclear family as a rational enterprise. Meant to teach children their multiplication tables, the first half of the song moves from the "ancient mystic trinity" (1) and the theological virtues (5-6) to the demonstrative properties of Euclidean geometry (13-14). The second half consists of stanzas of equations illustrating the multiplicative properties of the number three. These stanzas, though, are bracketed with this refrain:

> A man and a woman had a little baby,
> Yes, they did.
> They had three in the family,
> That's a magic number. (5-8)

By implicating the "ancient mystic trinity" (1) in a much more (re)productive magic, Dorough's song endows the crystal gate's chivalric motto with a much more rational and heteronormative significance. The result is a wonderfully recursive claim to authority, one that locates in Dorough's lyrics an *auctoritas* which exists prior to and, as Morgan puts it, "extends outside" the fiction of the

---

[47] Ibid., 30.
[48] Aronstein and Thompson, "Coding," 60.
[49] Bob Dorough, "Three is the Magic Number," *Lyrically*, accessed 21 July 2016, http://lyrics.wikia.com/wiki/Schoolhouse_Rock:Three_Is_A_Magic_Number.

novel.[50] This *auctoritas,* however, also remediates the novel's fictions by integrating the song into its text as the final "key" to unraveling the mystery of Halliday's failure with Kira and Wade's ultimate success with Art3mis.[51]

Following Morgan, *Ready Player One* thus "develops itself into a quasi-sentient entity, the ultimate authority—or perhaps the ultimate *auctor*—that directs action in, and defines the world of, the fiction."[52] Working through a complex syllabus of allusions to the 1980s, gaming culture, and medievalism, it constructs its own fantastic past as a kind of enormous puzzle, one that gradually becomes legible via Halliday's journal and the other texts that it establishes as authoritative.[53] In doing so, the novel authorizes as real—which is to say, heteronormative—a privileged relationship to mass culture that is demonstrated through Wade's ability to produce meaning from even the most obscure bits of mass culture.[54] The problem, though, is that this is an essentially consumerist and, as Condis points out, gendered model of reading, so much so that much of what the novel celebrates as elite gameplay takes the form of "fliksyncs": simulations that require players to recite lines from movies like *WarGames* and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* while precisely emulating the gestures and inflections of the films' white, male, heterosexual protagonists.[55] Players, as such, are rewarded for both their ability to perform as heteronormative white men and, as Condis writes, for suppressing anything that might mark them as queer or differently gendered.[56]

* * *

Ready Player One goes a step further, however. As Aronstein and Thompson observe, it authorizes this model of reading as an outgrowth of an older, more heroic tradition: the Arthurian trope of the knight errant whose redemption depends upon his wherewithal to distinguish the illusionary from the real.[57] Indeed, Wade's heroic trajectory calls to mind many of the didactic, neo-chivalric works that emerged at the turn of the last century to address a perceived rise in delinquency and effeminacy in white, protestant, adolescent males. These works encompassed a wide range of textual production, from "literary" compilations of Arthurian material for younger readers to works developed in support of the various character-building movements of the time.[58] They were full of

---

[50] Morgan, *Invention,* 34.

[51] Ibid., 34.

[52] Morgan, "Authority," 29.

[53] Condis, "Playing," 6.

[54] Ibid., 5.

[55] Ibid., 10-13.

[56] Ibid., 13-15.

[57] Aronstein and Thompson, "Coding," 60.

[58] See David MacLeod, *Building Character in the American Boy: The Boy Scouts, YMCA, and Their Forerunners, 1870-1920* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983); Alan Lupack, "Visions of Courageous Achievement: Arthurian Youth Groups in America," in *Studies in Medievalism VI: Medievalism in North America,* ed. Kathleen Verduin (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1994), 51-68; Julie Couch, "Howard Pyle's 'The Story of King Arthur and His Knights' and the Bourgeois Boy Reader," *Arthuriana* 13.2 (2003): 38-53; and David Setran, "Developing the 'Christian Gentleman': The Medieval Impulse

knight-errantry and other courtly accounts cribbed from medieval sources or their contemporary analogs and were intended as exemplary proxies for the challenges that their adolescent readers would face as they matured into the *fin-de-siècle* equivalent of the information economy—the bureaucratic and middle-management positions afforded by the onset of urbanism and industrialization.[59]

Part of a wider enthusiasm for editions of medieval texts for children, many of these works justified themselves through what Pugh and Angela Weisl describe as complementary fictions equating the child with the developmental equivalent of the medieval as a sort of collective childhood.[60] While such sentiments certainly owed much to enduring anti-medieval traditions, they were equally indebted to a Darwinist logic that, as Kimberly Reynolds and David Setran write, expressly equated childhood development with a larger imagined racial and cultural "evolution" from the primitive to the civilized.[61] Constructing childhood as modern and yet putatively pre-modern, this logic not only imagined the child as an inherently queer subject but inspired many of the works that have come to constitute the so-called "Golden Age" of children's literature, with authors like Carroll, Graham, and Baum embracing, as Pugh writes, "oddness . . . as a chief narrative value" and channeling, as Seth Lehrer writes, their period's fascination with evolutionary biology and historical linguistics into Jabberwockies, reluctant dragons, and other nonsensical and yet paradoxically articulate creatures.[62]

For authors working in the character-building tradition, however, the atemporal potential of the adolescent boy proved much more vexing. As inevitable as it was vital, the boy's passage into adulthood represented a queer passage, subject to a fraught and explicitly temporal "duality," as George Walter Fiske writes in his *Boy Life and Self-Government* (1912):

> Every natural boy is, more or less clearly, two boys, both James and Jimmie; the prime little pink-and-washed Puritan, and the saucy little rough-and-tumble heathen, struggling together for the mastery for several busy years.[63]

Fiske worries that, if managed incorrectly, such competing potentialities could produce two

---

in Protestant Ministry to Adolescent Boys, 1890–1920," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 20.2 (Summer 2010): 165-204.

[59] Couch, "Howard Pyle," 39; MacLeod, *Building Character*, 8-15. Although ostensibly democratic, Couch and Setran argue that the character-building movement excluded the lower classes, Catholics, immigrants, non-whites, and, in many cases, women. See Couch, "Howard Pyle," 40-42, and Setran, "Christian Gentleman," 170-171.

[60] Tison Pugh and Angela Weisl, *Medievalisms: Making the Past into the Present* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 47-48.

[61] David Matthews, *Medievalism: A Critical History* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2015), 134-135; Andrew Lynch, "Le Morte DArthur for Children: Malory's Third Tradition," in *Adapting the Arthurian Legends for Children: Essays on Arthurian Juvenilia*, ed. Barbara Lupack (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 13-15; Kimberly Reynolds, *Children's Literature from the Fin de Siècle to the New Millennium*, 2nd ed. (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2012), 21; Setran, "Christian Gentleman," 166-167, 175-180.

[62] Pugh, "Oz," 218; Seth Lerer, *Children's Literature: A Reader's History, from Aesop to Harry Potter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 172-191.

[63] George Walter Fiske, *Boy Life and Self-Government* (New York: Association Press, 1912), 12.

antithetical species of pervert: "the hooligan" and the "hoodlum."[64] As the product of a "forced evolution . . . into manliness," the hooligan represents a "premature" (and effeminate) masculinity, whereas the "hoodlum" results from a "retarded" masculinity, "a boy barbarian in arrested development, lacking in manliness."[65] As edited, translated, or otherwise redacted, the chivalric works that proponents of the character-building movement promoted as an explicit answer to the "boy problem" were arguably as queer as their intended audiences, but they nevertheless represented a carefully regulated queerness: narrative outlets allowing the boy's internal "Jimmie" his "wild oats" while cultivating, as Fiske puts it, "the manliness which consists in self-control, a trained and self-disciplined will."[66] To this end, many of these texts construct their audiences as expressly mature readers, implicating them, as Julie Couch writes about Howard Pyle's *Arthuriad*, in a nostalgia for the past as "finally out of reach of [their readers'] present."[67]

A case in point is Sidney Lanier's *Boy's Froissart*, which explicitly constructs its readers as putative "historians," agents of their own estrangement from the queer temptations of Froissart's works.[68] Although Lanier acknowledges Froissart's atemporal appeal, he ultimately closets it, to borrow Couch's formulation, "within an enclosed textual past."[69] According to Lanier, Froissart's text requires significant editorial (which is to say adult) intervention to render it temporarily coherent and thus suitable for young readers: not only does it contain "many halting-places and many skipping-places," but also manifests "a gay habit of often relating events in chapter fifty which happened before those in chapter forty."[70] But even after normalizing Froissart's "gay habit[s]," Lanier still worries over the text's potential to confound young audiences, inasmuch as it testifies to an exemplary knighthood that seems "harder . . . nowadays than it was then":

> This is because we have so many more ways of fighting now than in King Edward the Third's time. A good deal of what is really combat nowadays is not *called* combat. Many struggles, instead of taking the form of sword and armor, will present themselves to you after a few years in the following shapes: the strict payment of debts; . . . the holiness of marriage; the lofty contempt for what is small, knowing, and gossipy; and the like.[71]

Here, Lanier constructs Froissart's text as fully legible only to adult readers—those who return to the text "after a few years"—and only then through mundane approximations of the chivalric past. In so doing, he requires that his readers reprise his earlier editorial interventions, abandoning, as proper adult readers, their boyish enthusiasm for Froissart's queer enchantments.

---

[64] Ibid., 16.
[65] Ibid., 16.
[66] Ibid., 15, 17.
[67] Couch, "Howard Pyle," 46-47 (46).
[68] Sidney Lanier, introduction to *The Boy's Froissart* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907), vi.
[69] Couch, "Howard Pyle," 39.
[70] Lanier, introduction, v-vi.
[71] Ibid., viii-ix.

<center>* * *</center>

Ready Player One likewise conscripts its readers as putative academics tasked with normalizing their own enjoyment of the past. In keeping with the conventions of the book-lover's mystery, it reveals itself at the last moment to have always been a medievalist text—a grail narrative passing as dystopian young adult fiction. As Aronstein and Thompson write, this revelation requires readers to return not years later but immediately to what had initially seemed to be the "absurd Arthuriana at the heart of its text, placing it in the service of the very ideologies the original parodic media texts critique, encouraging the readership to revere both these ironic transmissions and the traditions they parody."[72] In doing so, readers discover what they already knew in the first place: that Wade's transformation from painfully shy, overweight misfit to buff, heteronormative hero is predicated on a long trajectory of self-discipline and self-renunciation, one which is made legible and rational by the overarching Arthurian meta-narrative that inducts Wade and his companions into the chivalric.[73]

Yet while the rediscovery of the novel's medievalist elements makes Wade's experiences more timely, it has the opposite effect on the novel's queer elements. Aech, for example, is revealed to have never been relevant; she never posed a threat to Wade and Art3mis's budding, heteronormative relationship. The OASIS is revealed to be a version of Oz, a queer utopia that, as Pugh writes about the original, "threatens the very possibility of heterosexuality by revising the meanings of romance and erotic attachment."[74] By contrast, Wade and Art3mis are exonerated; despite the novel's frequent hints otherwise, they are revealed to have never been more than what they claimed to be. *Ready Player One* thus circles back on itself, disavowing its queer associations. As with Lanier's introduction to Froissart's work, it renders anything and everything that might have seemed mysterious or magical as symptoms of a mundane that is invariably constructed as real via the larger heteronormative and hegemonic project of reproducing the means of production.

What is more, *Ready Player One* makes readers complicit in this renunciation. As Morgan writes about the booklover's mystery, it asks readers to imagine themselves as co-conspirators in the "discovery of the secret held by the text, an important 'truth' undercutting certain spiritual faith or moral absolutism, and the subsequent exaltation of the text as the supreme authority."[75] In doing so, it reinscribes a model of reading that is constructed through and legitimized by an appeal to a presumably older and more authoritative critical praxis. The effect is very similar to the way that Condis describes the novel's fliksyncs, which interpellate players as understudies: stand-ins who are rewarded for the precision with which they are able to emulate older, more professional

---

[72] Aronstein and Thompson, "Coding," 60.
[73] Ibid., 58-62.
[74] Pugh, "Oz," 218.
[75] Morgan, *Invention*, 34.

performances that they will never be able to match and certainly not exceed.[76] *Ready Player One* asks readers to participate in what Morgan describes as the final act of the book-lover's mystery, the "ultimate destruction of the text, or at least the suppression of its truth, usually because its exposure would result in a major social upheaval."[77]

Ready Player One thus forecloses what Dinshaw describes as the queer potentialities of amateur reading. In reducing reading to a purely ludic game of memorization and textual association, it rejects the inherently deconstructive and, at times, disruptive ways that amateurs play with established texts and traditions and thereby produce alternative readings that trouble the careful binaries through which the illusion of heteronormativity is maintained.[78] *Ready Player One* is, in this sense, a pernicious novel. As an allegory about fan production ostensibly written for fans, it valorizes as chivalric a relationship to mass culture that recognizes its participants as "elite consumers" and "early adopters" only to the extent to which they are successfully able to renounce anything and everything that might mark them as queer or which might otherwise queer the franchises or technologies that inspire them.[79] In doing so, the novel reproduces as real and heteronormative the ideologies that Kücklich blames for the continued exploitation of fans via their immaterial labor: the belief that fans are always already professionals in the making, and as a result, are not worthy of being recognized and certainly not remunerated for their contributions.[80] Worse yet, the novel presents this ideology as an Easter egg of sorts, a hidden treasure that only the worthiest of readers can claim.

---

[76] Condis, "Playing," 12.
[77] Morgan, *Invention*, 34.
[78] Dinshaw, *How Soon is Now,* 34-37.
[79] Jenkins, *Convergence Culture,* 21.
[80] Kücklich, "Playbour."