

Egos, Easter Eggs, and Erotic Girl Nerds: A Feminist Critique of Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One*

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Abstract: Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* is a young adult novel designed to appeal to those invested in video game culture. With its significant references to 80s pop culture, the novel also attracts the attention of an older generation of video game fanatics. However, this novel poses significant challenges from a feminist perspective and when explored through this critical feminist lens, highlights the issues women in video game culture face on a regular basis. Drawing on feminist ideology, literary studies and media studies, this interdisciplinary examination of the novel, and the connected film, explore the toxic attitudes that are embedded in video games and Ernest Cline's approach to creating and subjugating female characters.

Keywords: feminism, media studies, literary studies, video game culture, popular culture

The world of video games has long been seen as a male dominated arena where women struggle to integrate themselves fully into the existing community. With rampant sexism,

stereotypical depictions and hyper-masculinized environments, women have often found themselves on the fringes of the video game world. As noted by Tomkinson and Harper, the exclusion of women has been a persistent issue in the video game community, and these processes of exclusion expand through both technological and cultural practices (Tomkinson & Harper, 2015 p. 619). Ernest Cline's novel, *Ready Player One*, embodies many of the challenges faced by women in the gaming community. While the novel predates the *gamergate* controversy of 2014, an online harassment campaign targeting women who spoke out against misogyny in videogames, the film release occurred after. Although it appears that some attempts were made to alleviate the blatantly masculinized environment created by Cline, the effects of *gamergate* only served to highlight the issues in both the film and the novel. Although *Ready Player One* may, on the surface, appear to be a hero's journey, a deeper look reveals a male-centric universe that continues the trend of video games' exclusion of women by focusing on one dimensional and stereotypical representations.

Set in 2044, this dystopian novel has the reader following Wade/Parzival, a young man who is chasing a substantial prize hidden in a virtual world by his idol, game designer James Halliday, after his death. Those who are focused on finding the clues left behind call themselves *gunters* – egg hunters whose purpose is to locate the hidden clues and win the ultimate game. The winner of the *easter egg* (a hidden element inside a game) earns himself ownership of the *OASIS*, a virtual reality world in which the whole of society now spends its time in order to escape the poverty and destruction of the real world. This prize is won by succeeding at a series of challenges to attain keys. The clues for the location of the virtual keys are deeply hidden in the *OASIS* games, Halliday's writings, and even within references to Halliday's life. These keys are required in order to enter Anorak's Castle and claim the ultimate prize.

While the reader must look past the pure egocentrism of this challenge and must be willing to embrace the '80s nostalgia that is shoved down the reader's throat at a nauseating pace, it is hard to ignore the male dominance that echoes through every chapter. Tracy Dietz argues that

US culture eroticizes male dominance, which puts women in a subordinate position and increases acceptance of rape and sexual aggression. This form of masculinity, especially as it plays out in video games, has real implications for people's tolerance of and even actions in support of sexual aggression toward women. (Dewinter & Kocurek, 2017 p. 62)

While Cline's novel doesn't overtly support the acceptance of violence against women, his adherence to the "stereotype of 'basement dwelling manboys' renowned for their lack of social skills and experience" and his exaltation of the hyper-masculinized emphasizes the challenges that women face within the gaming community (Tomkinson & Harper, 2015 p. 618). These struggles were brought to light with the gamergate controversy where women who stood up to the stereotypes and challenged the representations of women in video games were subjected to online abuse, threats, and degradation. This was sparked in a 2012 Twitter exchange where Ryan Perez, a game journalist for the popular video game blog *Destructoid*, posted several critical and condescending tweets towards Felicia Day. Day, an actress and avid gamer, was subjected to Perez's attacks for her involvement in video game culture, including allegations that she is a "glorified booth babe" (Garland, 2012).

By 2014 this had spiraled into full scale war against any woman who publicly challenged the portrayals of women in video games. In response to her web series, *The Feminist Frequency*, where she explores toxic representations of women in popular culture, Anita Sarkeesian was

targeted with rape threats and video games designed to propagate the desire to beat her. Men, feeling that their reign as masters of the video game universe was being threatened were fighting back against women through message boards and doxing (the posting of private information to public forums). Among some of the less threatening sentiments were statements such as “video games are the last place for guys to hang out and now women are taking over. Why not just save us the trouble and instead of eliminating our fantasy world just throw us in work camp to provide for their bastard children (literally speaking) while they shit all over us . . . wait they already do that” (Dewinter & Kocurek, 2017 p. 59). Cline doesn’t go so far as to openly degrade the female gamers in his novel, but he certainly reflects a similar mindset. Even the protagonist Wade recognizes that “...most gunters are male, and they can’t accept the idea that a woman has beaten and/or outsmarted them” (Cline, 2011 p. 170).

Despite the fact that “45 percent of US game players are women of all ages, and the number hovers around 50 percent women players in other countries, as well” Cline’s video game world all but ignores the women in the virtual OASIS (Dewinter & Kocurek, 2017 p. 57). Other than Art3mis (his competitor/love interest), the only thing the reader hears of women revolves around Wade’s inability to speak to them: “to me, they were like some exotic alien species, both beautiful and terrifying” (Cline, 2011 p. 31). Women in the novel are secondary characters which echoes the presentation of women in video games themselves where “female characters [appear] as background characters compared to male characters... the majority of characters...were male (75.4%)” (Cox, Eno, & Guadagno, 2012 p. 55).

Cline’s text makes the “gamer” identity legible by linking it to some of the cultural codes that define “heteronormative white masculinity” which “is equated with expert, fan knowledge of gaming mechanics, structures, and discourses” (Condis, 2016, p. 5). This idea of fan

knowledge forms the basis of the hunt for Halliday's easter egg. Discussions take place amongst the characters in private chat rooms where the "boys" test each other's knowledge, challenge each other's skills and use sexual prowess to create status. This general message is embedded throughout the entire text where nearly all the pop-culture references are male-centric:

DeLoreans, *Dungeons and Dragons*, and *Blade Runner* to name a few. Even the challenge itself requires one to explore the world through Halliday's eyes forcing the player to take on the male perspective as they play the game. In order to "win", gunters need to have an extraordinary amount of fan knowledge, much of which is derived from the video games and movies that Halliday created, loved, and obsessed over. Quite literally, in this novel, manhood equates success. Or, at least, a specific type of manhood as anyone who is unwilling to view the world through the eyes of the white male will not succeed. In *Playing the Game of Literature: Ready Player One, the Ludic Novel, and the Geeky "Canon" of White Masculinity*, Megan Amber Condis recognizes how deeply this concept is present in the novel:

In fact, in the case of the Flicksync based on the movie WarGames, Halliday visualizes the process of identifying with a white masculine subject by replacing the user's personal avatar with one modeled after Matthew Broderick's David Lightman (even the character's name means: "white guy"). Wade describes his experience with the Flicksync thusly:

I noticed my reflection in the game's screen. It wasn't my avatar's face I saw there. It was Matthew Broderick's face. A young pre-Ferris Bueller and pre-Ladyhawke Matthew Broderick.

Then I knew where I was. And *who* I was.

I was David Lightman, Matthew Broderick’s character in the movie WarGames. And this was his first scene in the film. (Cline, 2011, p. 108)

To win Halliday’s game, the player must literally see him or herself as a young, white, male hacker. If the player fails to recognize the transformation or refuses to “go with the flow” and adopt this new persona, he or she will lose the game. (Condis, 2016 p. 14)

While taking a close read of *Ready Player One*, it is also valuable to take the time to explore some of Cline’s poetry which heavily influences his portrayal of women in the novel. Of particular interest is Cline’s poem “Nerd Porn Auteur” which is available as a spoken word piece on his website www.ernestcline.com, but of which the written version was found celebrated on Reddit. Throughout this piece, Cline demonizes the men who enjoy traditional pornography calling them

...beer-swilling sports bar dwelling alpha-males

Men who like their women stupid and submissive

Men who can only get it up for monosyllabic cock-hungry nymphos
with gargantuan breasts and a three-word vocabulary. (Cline, 2000)

While he claims that “I don’t wanna watch this misogynist he-man woman-hater porn”, Cline’s attempt to acknowledge the porn industry’s tendency to exploit and degrade women is severely undermined by his own fetishizations (Cline, 2000). He tries to pass as progressive with his disdain for the “collagen-injected/liposuctioned women/many of whom have resorted to surgery and self-mutilation/in an attempt to look the way they have been told to look” however, he continues to objectify women by creating an overly sexualized vision of a traditionally less sexualized group of women—the nerds (Cline, 2000).

You can have the whole cheerleading squad,
I want the girl in the tweed skirt and the horn-rimmed glasses:
Betty Finnebowski, the valedictorian.
Oh yes.
First I want to copy her Trig homework,
and then I want to make mad, passionate love to her
for hours and hours
until she reluctantly asks if we can stop
because she doesn't want to miss Battlestar Galactica.
Summa cum laude, baby!
That is what I call erotic. (Cline, 2000)

Despite his insistence that he is not a misogynist, to Cline women are still to be consumed and claimed for his own desires because, in the end, as he states “I mean, I'm a guy. And guys need porn./ Fact./"Like a preacher needs pain, like a needle needs a vein,"/Guys need porn”(Cline, 2000). This sentiment is echoed in the novel by Wade who celebrates masturbation and experiments with sex-dolls where he notes “at the end of the day, I was still a virgin, all alone in a dark room, humping a lubed-up robot. So, I got rid of the [doll] and went back to spanking the monkey the old-fashioned way” (Cline, 2011 p. 193).

Cline’s views of women for consumption also carries over into *Ready Player One* where the only female identifying character serves little purpose other than that of a reward for Wade when he succeeds on his “heroic” journey. In her paper “The OASIS of Oppression”, Brittany Walsh states “despite the lack of blatant misogyny, there are still sexist ideals present in the

novel that shape the way we think”(Walsh, n.d.). A significant focus of these sexist ideals is Art3mis and her relationship, not only with Wade, but with the environment itself. Art3mis, or “Arty”, has the potential to be the powerhouse woman that the reader wants her to be. She is a high ranking “gunter” with skills that far surpass many of the male characters’, including Wade’s, and yet, Cline reduces her to the “women as reward trope” that Anita Sarkeesian discusses in her web series. This role for Art3mis is set up early in the novel and she never escapes Cline’s demeaning hand, despite her potential to be a strong player in the OASIS world.

Quickly, the reader learns that “Arty” is the focus of Wade’s desires and that he has been focusing his sexual attention on her for an extended period. Wade knows nothing about her other than what she posts online for her audience to read and yet he states, “it probably goes without saying that I had a massive cyber-crush on Art3mis” (Cline, 2011 p. 35). While this isn’t terribly unusual, as most people can relate to having a “crush” on someone they have never met, Wade takes his celebrity crush to an obsessive level telling Arty “I’ve had a crush on you since before we even met.” From reading your blog and watching your POV. I’ve been cyber-stalking you for years” (Cline, 2011 p. 170).

Even if the reader were to ignore the fact that admitting to cyber-stalking would generally cause a woman to run the other way, Wade’s approach to Art3mis crosses from the relatively creepy to the criminally punishable as their interactions continue. Cline’s inability to demonstrate any sort of understanding of women is highlighted by his celebration of the “no means yes” approach. There is nearly an entire chapter dedicated to Wade’s pressure on Art3mis to develop a relationship with him that she clearly doesn’t want. At the top of their online conversation, Art3mis indicates to Wade “you seem like a great guy. But we’re competitors. Rival gunters. Sworn enemies. You know the drill”, and while she has indicated that she does not

want to continue to develop this friendship, Wade takes this as a challenge and continues to drive the conversation forward, offering more intimate “virtual interfaces” and compliments which she deflects (Cline, 2011 p. 169). He pursues and she’s polite but tries to move on in the conversation. Cline, in his writing, seems to highlight the idea that “in a situation of inequity the woman is not encouraged to take her own needs seriously, to explore them, to try to act on them as a full-fledged person” (Baker Miller, MD, 1986 p. 18). Art3mis has her own focus – Halliday’s easter egg- but it’s Wade’s sexual advances that matter and become the focus of the text.

Also, of little importance in Cline’s world are the boundaries which Art3mis sets. She is very clear that she wants nothing do to with Wade but Wade refuses to accept this response.

Parzival: Can I at least keep emailing you?

Art3mis: Not a good idea.

Parzival: You can’t stop me from emailing you.

Art3mis: Actually, I can. I can block you on my contact list.

Parzival: You wouldn’t do that, though. Would you?

Art3mis: Not if you don’t force me to.

Parzival: Harsh. Unnecessarily harsh. (Cline, 2011 p. 174)

Art3mis absolutely *can* stop Wade from emailing her. It is her right to deny that contact but in Cline’s (and therefore Wade’s) world, as a woman, what she wants doesn’t matter. This is a predatory situation with Wade as predator and Arty as prey as Wade not only disregards the fact that Arty has told him she doesn’t want him to keep emailing, but he also threatens her by

saying that she can't stop him. Then furthers the distortion of the relationship by claiming that she is being unreasonable.

Given that Cline appears to ascribe to the idea that once rejected, men should continue their advances until the woman changes her mind, Arty does, in fact, begin to respond to Wade's emails and they develop what Wade takes to be a relationship. She claims to be too busy to respond, responds in short answers, and then Wade's persistence is rewarded, and they have lengthy conversations. This leads Wade to believe that "I was certain she had strong feelings for me..." but also notes that she keeps him at a distance and refuses to reveal any personal information to him (Cline, 2011 p. 177). For Wade, however, just the attention she gives him indicates the presence of a relationship and so, of course, when she decides that she no longer wants contact with him, Wade is devastated by the breakup. Except, of course, that Arty thinks otherwise "'No, Z,' she said firmly. 'I am *not* breaking up with you. That would be impossible, because *we are not together*'" (Cline, 2011 p. 187). There was suddenly venom in her voice. '*We've never even met!*'" (Cline, 2011 p. 187). Once again, Wade resorts to boundary breaking and stalking.

I tried everything I could think of to reach her. I sent her avatar flowers. I made multiple trips to her avatar's stronghold, and armoured palace on Benatar, the small moon she owned. I dropped mixed tapes and notes on her palace from the air, like lovesick bombs. Once, in a supreme act of desperation, I stood outside her palace gates for two solid hours, with a boom box over my head, blasting "In Your Eyes" by Peter Gabriel at full volume. (Cline, 2011 p. 203)

With these interactions with Art3mis, Cline's writing has intermingled the concepts of courting and stalking in a way that not only celebrates uninvited advances but rewards Wade for them as, predictably, Wade and Art3mis end up together.

Cline's handling of the connection between Wade/Parzival and Art3mis/Samantha is not the only problem in his portrayals of female characters. Despite Cline's *Nerd Porn Auteur* claims that he's less misogynistic than other men, Art3mis' physical portrayals are drowning in sexism. Cline spends little time describing most characters, resorting only to the basics needed to allow the audience to create a general mental image, but his descriptions of Art3mis are far more detailed and often span a paragraph. The first description we get of Art3mis is as follows:

She wore a suit of sealed gunmetal-blue armor that looked more like sci-fi than fantasy. Twin blaster pistols were slung low on her hips in quick-draw holsters, and there was a long, curved elvish sword in a scabbard across her back. She wore fingerless Road Warrior-style racing gloves and a pair of classic Ray-Ban shades. Overall, she seemed to be going for a sort of mid- '80s postapocalyptic cyberpunk girl-next-door look. And it was working for me, in a big way. In a word: hot. (Cline, 2011, p.87)

Contrast this with Cline's description of his best friend, Aech, which lasts one sentence: "Aech's avatar was a tall, broad-shouldered Caucasian male with dark hair and brown eyes" and is hidden in a chapter of the book where Wade and his gunter friends meet up to insult each other by calling each other *pussies* and *fags* and celebrate their masculinity and video game prowess in a pissing contest of trivia knowledge and manhood (Cline, 2011 p. 38).

There is a significant amount of writing dedicated to subjecting Art3mis to the male-gaze and providing detailed descriptions of her appearance. At an event that Wade and Arty attend,

Wade continues his focus on how she looks: “she was wearing evening attire: a gunmetal blue dress that looked like it was spray painted on” and equal amount of time with male characters smack-talking each other in an attempt to prove their manhood (Cline, 2011 p. 184). Cline manages to create a clear message: the boys are there for power, Art3mis is there for sex. In addition, Cline’s consistent use of gunmetal blue for describing Arty’s clothing provides a distinct connection between power, violence, and the consumption of Art3mis.

The power dynamics within the novel also serve to remind us that Cline struggles to move away from the straight white guy mentality. We see evidence of this not only in the depictions of Art3mis, who despite being a higher skilled player than Wade, is shown to need his help to get past the first challenge despite having weeks of trying, but also in Cline’s failed attempt to integrate diversity into his novel. Aech is Wade’s best friend and Wade trusts him because of his manliness and vast knowledge of the Halliday cannon. However, as we come to learn later in the novel, Aech is actually Helen, an African American lesbian woman. While Wade claims to Arty that “this is the OASIS. We exist as nothing but raw personality in here” Aech has learned that personality is only relevant if you’re accepted in the first place (Cline, 2011 p. 171). Helen’s mother had wisely recognised the “rules” that even a fictional gaming world demands and had “lied about her daughter’s race and gender on the application [for school]” (Cline, 2011 p. 320).

Here Cline has the opportunity to acknowledge the barriers that people face within the gaming community but instead of creating a genuine moment of exploration, he resorts to a superficial interchange between Wade and Helen where Wade decides that her sexuality doesn’t matter. While this appears to be a great step for Wade, it’s hampered by Cline’s stereotyped

representation of the lesbian character, which is even more exaggerated in the film, and Wade's refusal to accept Helen as a woman.

Despite his statements that he still had his best friend regardless of her sexuality and skin color, Wade quickly states "even though I now knew Aech was actually a female in real life, her avatar was still male, so I decided to continue to refer to him as such" (Cline, 2011 p. 330). Not only does this tell us that Wade is not as accepting as he claims to be but also that the white male avatar representation is of more value than the true version of Helen. Given that in the article *Beauty in the Background*, Cox, Eno and Guadagno have determined that "personalization of avatars has been shown to increase identification as players view the avatars as reflections of themselves. Furthermore, the avatars are created with characteristics that are deemed desirable by the player, which may increase identification with and imitation of individuals' video game avatars," having Helen's avatar as a large white male in the novel and an oversized male monster designed to give the impression of an intimidating, weaponized being in the film, Cline has reinforced not only the idea that cis-gendered, white men are of higher value in the video game world but has also played on the stereotype that lesbians really want to be men (Cox, Eno, & Guadagno, 2012 p. 51). This stereotype is even more reinforced in the film version where the real/in person Helen is shown to be very masculine in appearance, thus reinforcing the "butch" image (Spielberg, 2018).

While Spielberg's film adaptation does strongly reinforce the lesbian stereotype, it has managed to resolve at least a few of the issues created by the source material. Whereas in the novel, Wade is the dominant figure, Art3mis has a very secondary role, and the focus is on the success of the strong, independent man, the film approaches things differently. Art3mis for example, is given the role of leader of the resistance- an element which doesn't exist in any form

in the book. This provides her with a deeper motivation for her involvement in the hunt and a much more powerful character. Instead of her taking a background to Wade's success, we see Arty/Samantha offer ideas, create and execute plans and take as much control as is possible in the male dominated universe. She controls the plan. She takes the risks. However, because there is a tendency in the video game community for men to struggle with the idea women being more powerful than them, despite her superior abilities she still assumes his superiority "that's why I think you're gonna win" she tells him "the OASIS needs you", choosing to relinquish her power in favour of his (Spielberg, 2018).

While Arty is given more power, she still falls victim to Hollywood's need to sexualize women. Her character is presented as overly skinny despite the novel insisting that she's curvier. Arty's clothing is skin-tight and designed to enhance waist to hip ratio - a typical portrayal of a woman in video games according to the article *Big Breasts and Bad Guys: Depictions of Gender and Race in Video Games* which points out that "women are most commonly depicted as having very large breasts, tiny waists, and full, pouting lips... and often wearing tightly fitting or otherwise revealing clothing that fails to contain her impossibly proportioned body" (Dickerman, Christensen, & Kerl-McClain, 2008 p. 22, 23). Art3mis is also given the typical role of *tease*, providing Wade with longing looks, subtle contact and lines such as the innuendo filled "You come prepared? What kind of objects are you rocking...full body?...can you feel this?" (Spielberg, 2018).

She is not the only victim of the sexualized aspect of women in film as we see several other examples of this throughout the movie. While the most ridiculous is the literal sex kitten (a woman dressed in a kitten costume in a virtual club) who swoons over Wade, antagonist Nolan

Sorrento's partner/assistant, a character who does not appear in the novel, is a close second. She is clearly designed to be the exotic, sexy, assistant whose main purpose in the film appears to be speaking in a breathy voice favoured by phone sex operators everywhere while telling Sorrento "They're kids, Nolan. Man the hell up" (Spielberg, 2018). This continues to reinforce the message that women want the hyper masculinized, powerful, take-what-you-want male.

Also worth mentioning is the role of *Kira* in both the film and the novel. While she is the wife of Halliday's partner, Odgen Morrow, she is treated as a possession throughout the story line. She is the key to challenges in the OASIS and yet her existence is entirely in relation to what the men want. "In his autobiography, Morrow wrote that she was the "quintessential geek girl," unabashedly obsessed with Monty Python, comic books, fantasy novels, and video games... every single one of the guys developed a massive crush on her..." (Cline, 2011 p. 119). This is very reminiscent of the women that Cline fetishizes in *Nerd Porn Auteur* and he continues to draw overt sexual attention to the *nerd girl*. To add to this, she is the reason the contest exists: because Halliday pined away for so long. We know little about her, and even less in the film, yet she is central to Halliday's story. He wanted her and his friend got her and therefore he designs a contest where fixing that mistake is the central purpose. While neither the book nor the film give us much of an impression of Kira as a woman, both provide us with the same idea: Halliday didn't get what he wanted and what he wanted was Kira. She is a prize to be won.

The role of Kira takes slightly different forms in the two mediums. In the film, Kira is quite literally there for the taking. Halliday and Kira had one date where "she wanted to go dancing. So, we watched a movie" (Spielberg, 2018). This indicates clearly that Halliday was more concerned with what he wanted than Kira's interests, so he designs a challenge where she needs to be rescued from zombies and asked to dance. The player literally must go and *claim*

Kira. If the audience ignores the fact that this perpetuates the *damsel in distress*, there is still the impression that Halliday is certain that if he had actually taken *the leap not taken* that Kira would be *his* and his life would be better. In order to accept this, Spielberg is asking the audience to suspend their disbelief that Kira might have had an opinion of her own and to disregard the fact that she was married to Halliday's best friend.

Particularly interesting is Kira's Dungeons and Dragons character's name of *Leucosia* which is only mentioned in the book. *Leucosia* is one of the names of the Sirens in Greek Mythology and the only name by which Halliday would address her (Cline, 2011 p. 361). By using this name, Cline has placed responsibility for Halliday's position in life on the shoulders of Kira. The Sirens were known for luring men to their deaths using their beauty and, "over the centuries, they became the personification of dangerous, beautiful women (femme fatales), and sometimes even ordinary women were called Sirens if their seductive lifestyle led to some misfortune or death" ("Siren—History of Sirens," 2019). By Halliday acknowledging her only by this name, he is implying that she is responsible for his loneliness- that she has lured him into her "trap" and left him there to suffer.

The tropes of woman as reward and femme fatale are not the only two that appear throughout the novel or film. Anita Sarkeesian discusses how "upon successful completion of many arcade games players were rewarded with the related Smooch of Victory trope, so named for the kiss the hero received as a reward for rescuing a kidnapped princess" (Sarkeesian, 2015). We see this with Kira in the film where there is much discussion surrounding challenges where the characters assume that in order to win, Kira must be kissed, but we also see this with Art3mis in both the film and the novel. She is Wade's reward - his prize to be won. While this woman as

reward trope is a disturbing trend in Cline's portrayal of women with most female characters relegated to that role, as we have seen, it is certainly not the only issue that exists in *Ready Player One*.

Cline falls victim to what Sarkeesian discusses as being “male entitlement” which “operates in the background of our culture; it’s a socially constructed mentality that is so deeply ingrained that it’s often invisible, operating as an unquestioned base assumption” (Sarkeesian, 2015). His depiction of women draws deeply on video game subculture where women are commodities and prizes to be won. With an obsessive focus on the ‘80s and the early days of video game technology, one must wonder how much influence is taken from some of the old games where the consumption of women is even more obvious.

Games such as *Metroid*, released in 1986, appeared revolutionary because winning the game resulted in the protagonist being revealed to be a woman, however, depending on how quickly the players win, she is shown in various states of undress.

One of the first games to exploit the Women as Reward trope, as both reveal Samus in various states of undress. The better a player does, the more clothing is removed. If the player completes the game in under 3 hours Samus is shown without her armor in a leotard. If the player finishes in under 1 hour, they are treated to Samus in a bikini. (Sarkeesian, 2015)

Like video games such as *Metroid*, Cline's text is deeply flawed in its portrayal of women. Not only does Cline create characters who are superficial and solely there for the service of his male characters, but he reinforces a wide variety of stereotypes. With cis male video

gamers so deeply protective of their *territory* it's not surprising to see that critiques of Cline's work are met with the same anger seen when video games are challenged. In his article "*The Critics Must Be Crazy: 'Ready Player One' Doesn't Glorify Toxic Nerd Culture*" writer Erik Kain states:

...in this case there's an entire contingent of politically motivated critics determined to make Ready Player One look bad and, by extension, somehow link it to gamers, #GamerGate, the alt-right and the evils of nerd culture. It goes beyond subjective analysis and into the realm of foolish dishonesty. And I think it needs to be called out. (Kain, 2018)

Kain, and others, are unwilling to explore the flaws in their video game society, calling these challenges "grasping at straw" and "hogwash" and that essentially everything was fine "until gamergate came along"(Kain, 2018). His reference to gamergate reinforces what women in the video game community have known all along: that if you aren't a white male, you don't count.

Kain continues to deny the presentation of women in the film adaptation "I don't even know what [the critics are] going on about with 'normalises the male desire for anime eyes and svelte or augmented bodies' as everyone in the OASIS simply has their own avatar designed in myriad different fashions, from greying wizards to Mortal Kombat characters to a weird looking purple guy with a skull for a chest" (Kain, 2018). While he is correct in that those avatars do exist, they are generally assigned to characters who exist only in passing. The female characters who are desired or draw focus reflect the exaggerated female features Kline claims don't exist in the movie.

Kain, along with the other gamers who are threatened by feminist perspectives of their arena, highlight the need for women to continue to speak out against the portrayals of women in video games. With his unwillingness to even consider an opinion different than that of dominant male point of view, Kain's rebuttal of the critiques is a strong reminder that the roots of sexism are alive and well in the gamer community. This is the mentality that has allowed for women in the video game community to be harassed and abused, and for flawed novels such as *Ready Player One* to be celebrated despite continuing the trend of video games' history of devaluing women.

It will likely be quite some time before women in the gaming community navigate spaces in which they are embraced with full equality. The value of women as commodities and objects to be claimed is deeply embedded in the history of both video games and society. It is a challenge for groups in power to step away and explore how that power influences both themselves and groups who are marginalized within their communities. Forums such as Reddit highlight how deeply these values have become entrenched through video game culture. A quick login to the forums reveals recent posts criticizing the politicisation of video games and memes that discuss how the female characters "turn them on" and while human sexuality and desire are natural biological processes, care must be taken to ensure that women's representation expands beyond stereotype and trope (Reddit, 2022). Cline's approach reduces women to caricatures and propagates the idea that women's value lays primarily in their abilities to please men.

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