Ready player one: ernest cline on how his gamer fantasy became a spielberg film

It took Ernest Cline 10 years to write Ready Player One. There were times he thought he would never finish the manuscript, let alone publish it. But the novel, mostly set in a global online pleasure world called Oasis, went on to become a bestseller and was translated into more than 20 languages. Now a film adaptation by Steven Spielberg is in cinemas – a real-life geek-to-riches drama so reflective of the book's plot it seems almost unfeasible.

The sci-fi story's setup is simple. Teen protagonist Wade Watts is a games fanatic living in a slum town outside Oklahoma City, but spending most of his time in the virtual world. The death of James Halliday, the eccentric creator of Oasis, triggers a treasure hunt that revolves around Halliday's main obsession: 1980s pop culture. Whoever solves a series of puzzles within the game becomes its new billionaire CEO. Wade enters the hunt, kicking into gear a breathless nerd empowerment fantasy.

" Wade is the embodiment of me as a teenager," Cline admits. " The structure of Ready Player One was a fun way for me to take all of the useless movie and video-game trivia you amass if you're a geek and somehow make it valuable – the key to a vast fortune, which it has proven to be for me."

Cline had been working in IT since the mid-1990s, doing tech support at emerging internet firms like CompuServe, where he realised how the internet was about to change the world. In his spare time, he was playing video games – a lot of video games. As a teenager in Austin, Texas, in the early 80s, he had witnessed the dawn of the coin-op era, feeding quarters into Pac-Man, Joust and Robotron machines. As an adult, seeing his work colleagues ensconced in online multiplayer games such as Ultima Online and

World of Warcraft, he began imagining what might happen when gaming, the internet and virtual reality converged.

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At first he dabbled in screenwriting. " The VCR landed in my teenage years, and opened up the whole world of film to me," he says. " It turned me into an uber cinephile, and I watched all my favourite movies over and over again. I felt very much like Wade – my heroes were George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, John Milius, John Hughes. I would order copies of their screenplays and study them."

In the early 2000s, Cline got a film script made, but the movie – Fanboys, about a bunch of kids trying to access Skywalker Ranch to see an early cut of The Phantom Menace – was disjointed and awkward. " It took years for the movie to get made, and my screenplay got heavily altered," he says, recalling battles with producers about changing the plot and characters. " It was all very dispiriting. But it prompted me to finish the novel, because I wanted to see what would happen when I had total control over the end product, as opposed to movies where you have almost no control over anything."

Ready Player One channels 80s geek obsessions into a text that reflects the language of emerging internet culture. The book has often been criticised for its lack of characterisation and dramatic tension: the three trials that make

up the backbone of the plot are hastily reported, with constant pop culture references substituting for the character's internal life. But this may be part of its appeal. The novel reads and functions like a video game walkthrough guide, or a forum post about someone's favourite gaming moments; it is commentary rather than a narrative. It's a novel for people who grew up parsing pop culture through the lens of news group fave lists and flame wars.

But that slightly distanced approach was never going to work for a movie – and neither were the original puzzle tasks. In the book, the competitors for Halliday's prize have to play specific video games to completion and re-enact vast tracts of cult films such as WarGames and Monty Python and the Holy Grail. It's fun on the page, but no one wants to watch Tye Sheridan spend six hours getting a high score on Pac-Man.

Cline worked with co-screenwriter Zak Penn and with Spielberg to create a modified set of trials for the film, including a new opener: an astonishingly vivid, high-speed car race through a virtual city. The second trial still involves Wade visiting an Oasis-based reproduction of a classic movie, but it's not WarGames. Instead, he has to navigate through a terrifying virtual version of The Shining's Overlook hotel, complete with spooky twins and an elevator full of blood. " WarGames didn't seem quite right because, although it's a great film, it's not that visually arresting. We wanted a movie with a unique and familiar environment," says Cline. " We made a list of possibilities, and when Steven saw The Shining [on it] he lit up. That was one of the most fun [things about] of working on the adaptation – cooking up this Shining funhouse tribute, and getting to see my hero geek out."

The movie also fleshes out the supplementary characters, especially Wade's love interest, Art3mis, who is also embedded in Oasis and competing for the prize. In the book, she's a paper-thin virtual idol, whom Wade stalks and harries for attention. Her role is a lonely geek's dream girl: a beautiful woman who shares Wade's pop culture obsessions and approvingly acknowledges his references. We meet the real woman behind the Art3mis avatar only at the end of the novel, at which point her function is to symbolise the book's " real life is more important than games" moral swerve.

Olivia Cooke as Art3mis in Ready Player One

In the movie, she leads a resistance group against the evil IOI Corporation, which wants to seize control of Oasis so it can be massively monetised. Actor Olivia Cooke, best known for her role in the horror TV drama Bates Motel, adds charm and depth to the character. She is given a life outside Wade's yearning.

Cline acknowledges the book's solipsistic focus, and puts it down to his inexperience as a novelist. " In retrospect, one of the ways I made it easier for myself to write the novel was by using a first-person narrative," he says. " Because it was such a sprawling story, anchoring the point of view with one character made it easier for me to keep track of what was going on – I could show the whole world from his perspective, but this ended up limiting the other characters. One of the biggest advantages of retelling the story cinematically is to give them more to do. Instead of Wade doing everything,

Art3mis has much more agency – she has a backstory and a personal investment in taking down IOI."

Spielberg's Ready Player One – in 2045, virtual reality is everyone's saviour

What also helps is having Spielberg in charge of the adaptation. The director famously started playing video games while making Jaws, inserting a brief glimpse of the Sega game Killer Shark into the movie, and he respected Cline's novel. " Through the production he had a dog-eared copy of the paperback that was filled with Post-it notes and highlighted sections," says Cline. " He gave copies of the book to other departments. So many things from the book that were never in the script made their way into the movie because he had everyone refer to the text for set design and even costumes.