

# Grief and Gaming- The Escapists Playground

Andreea Chituleanu

Submitted to the Faculty of Film, Art and Creative Technologies in candidacy for the  
BA (Honours) Degree in Design for Film – V.F.X

Submitted 13/02/2025

## **Declaration of Originality**

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Honours) Design for Film. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.



---

Andreea Chituleanu

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank all of those who have supported me throughout the writing of this thesis. I am grateful for all the feedback from my thesis supervisor Clare Barman, and all the insightful discussions we shared which helped me on my journey. I would also like to express my gratitude to my lecturer, John Buckley, for guiding me toward my specialization in VFX and for his guidance with this thesis. But most importantly for providing support when I was experiencing a great loss.

To my mom,

Who always believed in my abilities as an artist and allowed them to flourish. I am and always will be eternally grateful for the strength and resilience you instilled in me. That strength allowed me to push through the pain of losing you and allowed me to create something from it. Words on a page will never describe how grateful I am for you.

This thesis would not have been possible if not for the support and encouragement of all those mentioned above and many more, I am sincerely grateful to everyone who helped me get through this difficult time.

## **Abstract**

What if escapism is a healthy tool for coping with grief.

My thesis aims to breakdown the stigma often associated with escapism and instead tie it to inner healing. I use the dual process model to create a pathway for coping with grief and show how video games play a part in the healing journey (Stroebe and Schutt, 1999).

Through my analysis of the film *Ready Player One* (2018), I demonstrate the effects of video games on the grieving person. Furthermore, I discuss the role which virtual worlds have played on Generation Z, as it is the first fully online generation. This area of study is relevant as this is the next generation to make an impact as they begin to enter the working world.

Seeking therapy and working towards understanding our own emotions and how to deal with them is becoming increasingly more accepted. This is why areas of study that include the understanding of emotions are important and relevant. By connecting video games, a media which is comforting to many who play them, to grief, one of the most uncertain emotions, hopefully people can begin to grow around their grief to be able to move forward. The focus of this thesis is on allowing oneself to escape to the inner worlds provided in gaming to make strides towards healing.

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Foundation .....	3
Literature Review.....	3
Ready Player One (2018).....	7
Escapism and Immersion .....	11
Chapter 2: Virtual Worlds.....	13
MMORPG's .....	13
The Metaverse.....	14
Mind and Body .....	17
Identity .....	18
Memory and Nostalgia.....	20
Chapter 3 – Transformation .....	23
Isolation- Home .....	23
The Hunt – The Keys.....	25
The Copper Key.....	26
The Jade Key.....	27
The Crystal Key .....	28
Connection – The Iron Giant.....	30
Reward – The Easter Egg .....	31
Conclusion .....	34
Bibliography .....	36

## Table of Figures

Figure 1 Caroline Llyod's Bell Jar Model (Llyod, 2017, p.39) .....	5
Figure 2 Tye Sheridan as Wade Watts in his van (Spielberg, 2018) .....	7
Figure 3 Luis Carrasco's Oasis Planets, Concept Art (ArtStation 2017) .....	7
Figure 4 The hub of the OASIS projecting the video of James Halliday announcing the contest (Spielberg, 2018) .....	8
Figure 5 Nolan Sorrento showcasing how he would exploit the OASIS (Spielberg, 2018) .....	9
Figure 6 James Halliday at his funeral (Spielberg, 2018) .....	10
Figure 7 The Dual Process Model (GriefCompass, 2019) .....	12
Figure 8 Meta Horizon (Meta, 2024) .....	14
Figure 9 Parzival and Aech take a trip to the store (Spielberg, 2018) .....	15
Figure 10 Pizza's Socialria (Meta, 2024) .....	16
Figure 11 Cottonbro Studio, A photo of someone wearing a VR headset, Pexels (2021) .....	17
Figure 12 In this image Wade Watts is wearing a "Bootsuit" (Spielberg, 2018) .....	18
Figure 13 Aech, Parzival and Art3mis in Aech's Workshop (Spielberg, 2018) .....	19
Figure 14 The Stacks (Spielberg, 2018) .....	23
Figure 15 Aunt Alice fighting with her boyfriend in the kitchen while Wade watches (Spielberg, 2018) .....	24
Figure 16 Anorak showing the three keys (Spielberg, 2018) .....	25
Figure 17 Anorak gives Parzival the first key (Spielberg, 2018) .....	26
Figure 18 Wade getting into his car (Spielberg, 2018) .....	27
Figure 19 Art3mis receiving the second key (Spielberg, 2018) .....	27
Figure 20 Parzival receiving the final key (Spielberg, 2018) .....	28
Figure 21 Aech controlling a replica of the Iron Giant next to Parzival and Sho in front of Castle Anorak (Spielberg, 2018) .....	30
Figure 22 The Easter Egg (Spielberg, 2018) .....	31
Figure 23 A recreation of James Halliday holding the real easter egg (Spielberg, 2018) .....	32
Figure 24 A recreation of a young James Halliday looking at a "Game Over" screen (Spielberg, 2018) .....	33

# Introduction

“Going outside is highly overrated” – Ernest Cline p .268

Video games and their interactivity make them an effective narrative device but even more so an escape as discussed by Torben Grodal in his chapter on video games (Grodal, 2000, p.197-212). He further states that “video games provide the player with interactive means to change the course of the narrative” (Grodal, 2000, p.197). The ability to change narrative based on your decisions makes video games a more personal media than film and television. Grodal proposes that emotions triggered by film function differently than emotions triggered by video games. When viewing a film, you are feeling emotions through the lens of a character and the “dealing with” said emotion is linked with the abilities of the character not your own (Grodal, 2000, p.201). However, when interacting with video games, “it is the player’s assessment of his own coping potentials that determines the emotional experience” (Grodal, 2000, p.201). This is why I believe video games are an effective tool for exploring emotions and forming connections.

Recently I have experienced grief for the first time. Through dealing with my grief I have noticed that I often like to escape to other worlds, as a way of “ignoring” or “forgetting”. For this thesis I aim to better understand the connection between grief and gaming, and how gaming may be a tool for dealing with grief. I will be covering this topic over three chapters: escapism, virtual worlds, and transformation. I will be using a variety of academic literature from both a psychological perspective and a gaming perspective, some of which offer both. Furthermore, I will be using the example of the film *Ready Player One* (2018) to show how grief affects the main character and the way they interact with game worlds as a result. I will briefly summarise the film and discuss its relevance to my connection between grief and gaming.

In Chapter Two I will discuss the role of virtual worlds and their cultural significance, as virtual worlds are at the epicentre of this film.

Moreover, Generation Z is the first fully online generation which has experienced virtual worlds and among the first to experience these worlds in virtual reality. The studying of virtual worlds is culturally significant due to the very fact that almost everyone of Generation Z has experienced them first hand. They are a key part of the generation's nostalgic past and therefore it is important to study in order to view a link between gaming and emotions. Furthermore, Generation Z is the next generation to enter the workforce and are mostly of voting age. This is group are next to have an impact on the world around us, which makes them a particularly interesting study and key to understanding the future evolution of society.

Finally, I will be using semiotics to discuss the transformation of the main character, Wade Watts, throughout the film. Using his character as an example of how he has used gaming to deal with grief. Analysis of this film is key to understanding the cultural significance of gaming, and furthermore the impact of games on generations which grew up online. This film reflects our own world which makes its analysis significant.



# Chapter 1: Foundation

This chapter sets out the background to my research and contains the fundamental groundwork behind it. I will be doing a literature review of the area of study. I will then do a summary of the film *Ready Player One* (2018) to give the reader a better understanding of why I have selected this film. Furthermore, I will be discussing the virtual world and main character of the film in future chapters, a summary will give context to these discussions. Finally, I will discuss the role of escapism and immersion.

## Literature Review

**Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schut, *The Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement: A Decade on* (SAGE Publications) 2010**

Stroebe and Schut offer a model for coping with grief titled *The Dual Process Model*. This model proposes that the bereaved fluctuates between loss-oriented and process-oriented activities to deal with their grief in a healthier way. This model opposes the linear 5 stages of grief, which is more commonly referenced when discussing grief theory. This model allows for a back and forth between experiencing the loss and processing the loss. This aligns with the proposed value of video games in both experiencing and processing the loss, as it can offer insight into bereavement through narrative or simply offer an escape. Both of which are healthy coping mechanisms according to the dual process model. (DPM for short)

This article shows the value of their research a decade on, proving its viability. This model of dealing with grief has come up in nearly every piece of grief centric literature and I will be using it throughout my thesis, thus, proving its importance within my research. Caroline Lloyd

and Matthew Spokes et al. build upon this model, in their respective literature. I will be primarily drawing from their research as it is more simplified and closer related to my area of research. However, it is important to note that this article and its predecessor, *Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schut - The Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement* (1999), are the basis of any psychological discussion within this thesis.

### **Caroline Lloyd, Grief Demystified (Jessica Kingsley Publisher) 2017**

Lloyd (2017) discusses the misinterpretation of the five stages of grief (Kübler-Ross, 1969) and offers a new perspective on how to deal with grief based on Stroebe and Schut's dual process model. Llyod's offers a visual representation of grief which I found was both simple and accurate. This will act as a core to my research. Furthermore, this book addresses the uncertainty surrounding death and communication with the bereaved (Llyod, 2017,p.15). I propose that this gap in communication and language be filled with visuals. Llyod also offers a visual representation of grief which is interlinked with the DPM, further showing how visuals can fill in the language gap.

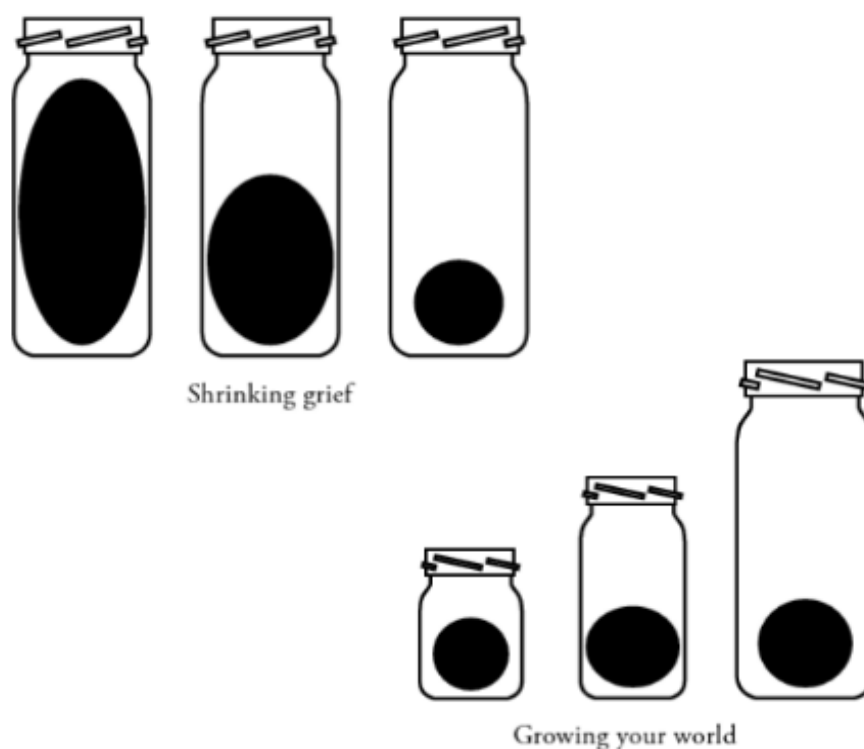


Figure 1 Caroline Llyod's Bell Jar Model (Llyod, 2017, p.39)

This model helped me understand the DPM, and provided the foundation for my understanding of grief theory. Lloyd explores cultural and historical events which have impacted the way we mourn and interact with death from a western perspective. The collective human experience with death is important to understand, as it provides a reason to explore this topic. Death is both personal and public, as is one's experience in a video game, this is why I believe the perspective this book offers is important to my research.

**Matthew Spokes, Jack Denham, Matt Coward-Gibbs & Caitlin Veal-  
I wasn't me, grieving in my room. I was Spiderman': gaming, loss and  
self-care following COVID-19 , Mortality, 1–16. (Published by Informa  
UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group) 2024**

This journal offers a practical example of gaming as a tool for dealing with grief through the dual process model. And further argues that gaming offers "therapeutic value" (Spokes, et al .2024, p.157). This practical study links gaming to the dual process model, which is the core method I will be using throughout my thesis, this is why this journal gives credibility to my theories moving forward. The existence of studies such as this one proves the viability of gaming as a tool for grief. As I am in the field of visual media, my thesis will not include scientifically conducted research, however this can provide an evidence-based foundation for my visual research.

**Sabine Harrer, Games and Bereavement (transcript Verlag, Bielefeld)  
2018**

Harrer offers a deep analysis of grief within gaming and the connection between the two. Harrer proposes that grief is intrinsically linked with gaming, providing examples such as falling from cliffs in games like the *Super Mario Bros.* series (Harrer,2018, p.10). The act of coming back from the dead and trying again, called respawning is a part of almost every game. Thus, interlinking death and gaming. This book serves as

more of an analysis on video games and their interaction with grief, whereas I would like to look at grief and our interaction with gaming because of it, as studied by Spokes et al. Harrer's research offers an insight into how video games and their creators bridge the gap between player and understanding grief. Harrer uses Freud's mourning and melancholia as the basis for her research on understanding grief. She further goes on to state that this is at the core of grief models such as the dual process model. This book serves as another link between grief and gaming but more specifically, gaming and the dual process model.

**Ryan Rogers, How Video Games Impact Players: The Pitfalls and Benefits of a Gaming Society (Lexington Books/Fortress Academic) 2016**

According to Ryan Rodgers, there is no disputing video games have a violent tradition (Rogers, 2016,p.73). Even arcade games such as *Space Invaders* (1978), had you shooting down aliens (Rogers, 2016,p.73). This further interlinks death and gaming as done by Harrer. Rogers further goes on to mention how video games have impacted real world attacks such as Columbine and Sandy Hook (Rogers, 2016, p.74), although the examples are extreme it speaks to the impact video games can have on real lives. Rogers further goes on to discuss the difference between games and other media, which is a necessary distinction, as I will be discussing video games within a film. This book offers examples of video games eliciting powerful emotions, which prove its therapeutic value as discussed by (Spokes et al.,2024, p.157).

## Ready Player One (2018)



Figure 2 Tye Sheridan as Wade Watts in his van (Spielberg, 2018)

*Ready Player One* follows the journey of Wade Watts (a.k.a Parzival), a teenage boy living in poverty in Columbus, Ohio. The year is 2045, there have been Corn Syrup Droughts and Bandwidth Riots. Overpopulation led to stacking trailers on top of each other to create a new type of high-rise, these are called “The Stacks.” Wade lives with his Aunt Alice and her deadbeat boyfriend. As an escape, he and most of the world spend their time in – the OASIS.



Figure 3 Luis Carrasco's Oasis Planets, Concept Art (ArtStation 2017)

The OASIS is a virtual world created by James Halliday and Ogden Morrow. Together they founded a company called *Gregarious Games*, which developed the GSS, *Gregarious Simulation System* which is where the OASIS operates. After the death of James Halliday (a.k.a Anorak), the players of the OASIS were made aware of a competition set up by Halliday. The winner of the contest would be given Halliday's shares of gregarious games, worth just over half a trillion dollars.



Figure 4 The hub of the OASIS projecting the video of James Halliday announcing the contest (Spielberg, 2018)

To win, there are three challenges, which each give you a key when they are completed. Together the keys unlock a portal where a golden egg will be found, "*The Easter Egg.*" This became *Halliday's Easter Egg Hunt*. For years people had tried and failed the first challenge, but no one could figure it out, eventually, average people gave up "hunting." Whilst some dedicated their lives to "the hunt," these people are called "*Gunters*" – egg hunters. Wade Watts is one of those people. He has nothing, this egg could give him everything. There is one final group of people in search of the egg, they are called "*Sixers*," and they work for Innovative Online Industries, "*IOI.*" Founded by a former begrudged Gregarious Games intern, Nolan Sorrento, who aims to turn the OASIS into an advertisement haven. Halliday and Morrow made the OASIS only

25 cents to join, the price of an arcade game. They believed The OASIS should be accessible to all; Nolan Sorrento plans to undo all their work.



Figure 5 Nolan Sorrento showcasing how he would exploit the OASIS (Spielberg, 2018)

This film is a story of an underdog defeating corporate greed, however there is much more within the semiotics of this film. It is a tale of a grief-stricken teenager learning how to move forward in a world he believed he was alone in. The reason I am using this film is because of its relevance, there are genuine issues we face as an online generation being tackled within this film. A Vox article written by Alissa Wilkinson (2018) states that the dystopian nature of *Ready Player One* is “only a few notches past the world we inhabit now”. She further goes on to state that the players of the OASIS, would “rather just escape into another world” (Wilkinson, 2018). Wade is looking for escape, he keeps himself busy within the OASIS to distract himself from his dystopian surroundings. He is also grieving the loss of his mother, who faced addiction related to their socioeconomic status. There is a striking resemblance between the world created by Cline and our own. Deadly viruses, severe weather, wars, artificial intelligence, all sounds like the makings of a blockbuster, but it is the world we live in. It is far too tempting to shut yourself in, ignore the news and lose yourself in a good book or “cozy game”. This is escapism, I propose that escapism can be used for good, going against the notion that escapism is



ethically wrong. I will be expanding upon this assertion. Furthermore, Wade shows the connection between grief and gaming, his character allows me to analyse the relationship between the two topics. I will be further discussing the world of the OASIS and Wade's transformation in Chapters Two and Three.



*Figure 6 James Halliday at his funeral (Spielberg, 2018)*



## Escapism and Immersion

Jean Baudrillard states that “simulation threatens the difference between ‘true’ and ‘false,’ ‘real’ and ‘imaginary’” (Baudrillard, 1988, p.166-184) The simulation of the created world then in turn becomes a real world. The lines become blurred, and you may find yourself lost in trying to define the real and imaginary. There is something innately human about wanting to belong to something, being a part of a world and accepted as a character within it. The real world gives meaning to the imaginary as it serves as an escape from the real. Escapism can be defined simply as “habitual diversion of the mind to purely imaginative activity or entertainment as an escape from reality or routine” according to Merriam-Webster. We often see the term used with negative connotations. It is viewed as a numbing of pain rather than an aid to help overcome pain. Eric Wolf Fried describes escapism as an indulgence of fantasy and daydreams (Fried, 2005, p.9-11). He further goes on to state that, “An individual may create fantasies, or fantasies may be mass-produced, commercial products. All fantasies have in common the avoidance or falsification of the world” (Fried, 2005, p.9-11). While it is true escapism is technically the avoidance of a world, it can also be seen as immersing yourself in a new world. Wolf states context is important, that there is a difference between escapism and attention to a world (Fried, 2005, p.9-11). Some medias are also viewed as more escapist than others. At the forefront video games are most often conflated with escapism. This further adds to the negative reaction, as video games are only recently becoming a more acceptable medium for storytelling



Figure 7 The Dual Process Model (GriefCompass, 2019)

You can relate the DPM with escapism and immersion. Thus, proving the role video games may play in the everyday life experience of a bereaved player. Immersion is loss-oriented, you could consider Herrer's work dissecting grief within gaming as loss-oriented. She focuses on loss and grief as a theme within video games, thus making the player face grief head on. Whilst escapism is restoration-oriented, we can see this in the film, Wade avoids his real life and instead creates a new identity as Parzival, his avatar.

Avatar: Representation of oneself within the game-space (Rogers, 2016)

Through his avatar he forms new and meaningful connections. Or you could even view immersion as restoration-oriented and escapism loss-oriented. The order does not really matter, what matters is the oscillation between the two. The journey is not linear, and you can go back and forth between the two modes with ease. But both have a place in the journey of dealing with grief.

## Chapter 2: Virtual Worlds

### Introduction

In order to understand the cultural significance of virtual worlds and how they operate, we must first look at its origins. In this chapter I will be discussing the massively multiplayer online role-playing game genre (MMORPG), and how it operates as a virtual world. I will then go on to discuss virtual worlds and why the OASIS is an effective virtual world. My aim is to better understand how virtual worlds operate in the real world versus how they operate in *Ready Player One*. The operation of these worlds is crucial to understanding how we may deal with grief in a restoration-oriented mode. Exploring these new virtual worlds allow us to grow our understanding of the real world we live in without ever leaving our home. It is an experience that is both public and private, as you can take it on alone in your room, or with friends on a couch or even alone in real life but with friends across the world in the virtual realm.

“A virtual world (also called a virtual space or spaces) is a computer-simulated environment which may be populated by many simultaneous users who can create a personal avatar” (Wikipedia, 2024)

Through this definition, we see how the virtual world is directly linked to the players within it. Thus, linking virtual worlds and ones own identity.

### MMORPG's

Nick Yee discusses the origins of the gaming world at length in *The Proteus Paradox: How Online Games and Virtual Worlds Change Us--And How They Don't* (Yee, 2014). *Dungeons and Dragons* (1974) is considered the first ever role-playing game (Yee,2014, p.11). This game allows you

to imbed yourself in a fantasy world, which drew inspiration from the world created by J.R.R Tolkien in *Lord of the Rings* (Yee, 2014, p.11). *Dungeons and Dragons* allows you to create, and role play a character set within fictional fantasy worlds. The cultural impact of *Dungeons and Dragons* is important as it directly influenced the genre of online role-playing games. It is the blueprint by which the genre functions, as Yee states “Contemporary online games draw heavily from the conventions of miniature wargaming and tabletop role-playing games” (Yee, 2014, p.17). The MMORPG brings friend groups together in an online space but also allows for further connection through interaction with strangers online. Furthermore, Yee discusses the impact of Blizzard’s *World of Warcraft* (2006), and its undeniable popularity, amassing a peak player base of 12 million paying subscribers, as of the writing of Yee’s book in 2013 (Yee, 2014, p.17). The popularity of MMORPG’s shows its cultural impact on not only the gaming world, but the world as a whole. The large player base incentivises the further exploration of virtual worlds by corporations.

## The Metaverse

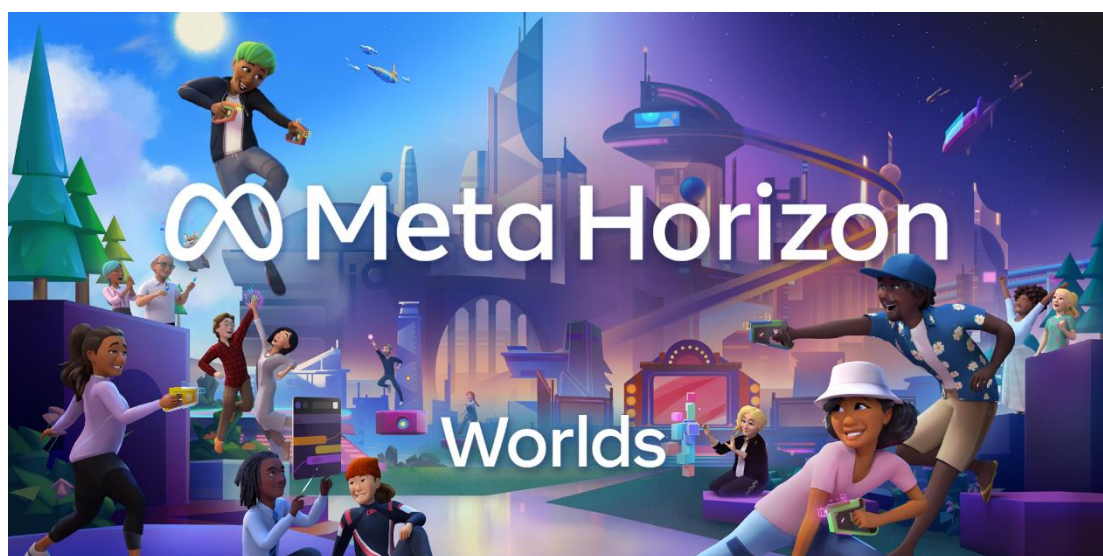


Figure 8 Meta Horizon (Meta, 2024)

*The Metaverse* is our version of the OASIS, a virtual reality virtual world. However, *The Metaverse* operates a little differently to the OASIS, it functions more like your phone, where you can download apps and games and access them through your VR headset. You can watch *Netflix* or play *Beatsaber* (a popular VR game). In the OASIS, you are your avatar and when you play *Beatsaber*, you are doing so through your character. The OASIS store is a location your avatar goes to and can buy powerful items, or other games. *The Metaverse* store is like an app store.



Figure 9 Parzival and Aech take a trip to the store (Spielberg, 2018)

*Meta Horizon Worlds* is the actual virtual world within the Metaverse, here you can make an avatar and explore virtual worlds. In *Ready Player One*, the OASIS is a response to a declining world. The OASIS offers a place to go when you do not have the ability to go anywhere in real life. It is in the name,

Oasis: “something that provides refuge, relief, or pleasant contrast”  
(Mirriam Webster, 2024)

We can view the Metaverse as a similar response creating a parallel between our world and the world of *Ready Player One*.

“According to the National Association of Realtors, last year, the typical first-time homeowner was 36 years old, a record high” (Hanley, Kodé, 2023). The article further goes on to state that “between 1999 and 2022, rent has grown 135 percent. Incomes have only increased by 77 percent in that time” (Moody’s Analytics, 2023, as cited by Hanley, Kodé, 2023). Generation Z is not afforded the same stability as previous generations. Not being able to afford moving out offers a whole other reason for a need to escape. Furthermore, if they can afford to move out, they will be weary of spending excess income on leisure activities as it could create a sense of financial instability. *The Metaverse* allows those with a VR headset to experience activities which aren’t affordable in their real lives.

*Meta Horizon Worlds* offers chatrooms, which are like the OASIS planets, where events take place. These rooms could be venues like a pizza parlour, where you could meet up with friends in a casual environment, or a stadium where virtual concerts are hosted. Virtual worlds extend our ability to connect with others in a way accessible to almost all. In the case of the OASIS, it is in fact accessible to all.



Figure 10 *Pizza's Socialria* (Meta ,2024)

Worlds like these allow for global socialisation and interaction with people you may never meet at your local pizza shop. Generation Z has



had to grow up through a global pandemic, many turning 18 in the year 2020. Officially becoming an adult and not being afforded the ability to celebrate, or even leave the house, is an experience only this age group has felt in the recent decades. Virtual worlds create communities which we can access and a place to foster connections even when restricted.

Ivelina Piryankova discusses medical and educational uses for virtual reality, such as tissue visualisation for surgeries (Piryankova, 2015). Virtual reality and virtual worlds expand well beyond socialising and can have lifesaving effects on our real lives and bodies. This further shows how virtual worlds can act in a restoration-oriented mode, but also loss-oriented as you might use it to look at old photos, or practice grief work exercises. Thus, imbedding the virtual worlds as an effective coping mechanism for grief.

### Mind and Body



*Figure 11 Cottonbro Studio, A photo of someone wearing a VR headset, Pexels (2021)*

It is important to understand the connection between mind and body because this is where the disconnect between real and virtual lives. Virtual exists in the mind, whilst reality is experienced by both. VR does bring some physical sensation, like wearing goggles, and feeling the trigger on your controller might feel like pulling the trigger on a gun. However, you can feel the disconnect, you are not so immersed that you find yourself confused about your own physical body. Piryankova discusses a study done where an artificial arm was placed in between 2 arms, one arm was not in the participants view, all they could see was an artificial arm and one real one. They were able to simulate ownership of the artificial limb by stroking the artificial limb and the real limb (out of view) (Piryankova, I 2015).



*Figure 12 In this image Wade Watts is wearing a "Bootsuit" (Spielberg, 2018)*

In this image Wade is wearing a suit, which puts this study in effect. The suit stimulates his real limbs in accordance with his avatar, creating a connection between mind body and virtual world. The line between real and virtual is becoming increasingly blurred. Although this sort of technology is not yet possible, this study proves that it one day could be possible yet again connecting our world to that of *Ready Player One*.



## Identity

Times of grief can often be related to loss of identity, like when a spouse becomes a widow (Llyod, 2017, p.25). In *Ready Player One* (2018) Wade tells us how you can be anyone in the oasis. When you do not know who you are anymore, it might be easier to simply become someone else. The OASIS allows the player to be any race (mythological and non-mythological), any gender (or no gender at all), any size (or shape), you could be anything. Ryan Rogers states that the difference between video games and other visual media is self-representation (Rogers, 2016, p.14-17). Meta states “With Quest Pro, we have introduced natural facial expressions. This feature is used to make your avatar's expressions look more natural in the virtual by detecting your facial movements and mirroring them in VR.” (Meta, 2024) This feature allows for further self-representation, even if your avatar looks nothing like you in real life, you can feel yourself embedded within this character you have created. In fact, dissociative identity disorder, according to studies conducted at the Mayo Clinic “involves “switching” to other identities, you may feel as if you have two or more people talking or living inside your head.” (Mayo Clinic, 2024). Often this is a trauma response, a new identity forms to deal with it. As a disclaimer, I would like to state that I am not comparing the seriousness of D.I.D to an avatar in a game. I aim to draw a connection between biological trauma response to grief coping mechanism. Biological evidence shows that another personality can help you deal with trauma, therefore an avatar can help you deal with grief as it can be a form of trauma.



*Figure 13 Aech, Parzival and Art3mis in Aech's Workshop (Spielberg, 2018)*

Aech chooses to represent themselves as a beefy, cybernetic orc. They are actually a black teenage girl. It is important to note that in the book, she chose to represent herself as a cisgender white male. She did this because she wanted to live in a world where she would not be discriminated against, because even in a virtual world, life might be easier if she were a white man. She kept her true self a secret from Wade, her best friend, because she did not want him to treat her differently. There can be real dangers and benefits to living in a world where you can be anybody. On the one hand, you can be and experience what life is like in someone else's shoes, allowing you to become more empathetic. On the other hand, people who are discriminated against may choose to give up their identity for one more accepted out of fear of being judged. Video games have a long way to go before they can tackle social and racial injustices, but it is something to keep in mind, as they are a powerful tool for identity which in turn can be a tool for grief.

## Memory and Nostalgia

Mark Wolf compares the exploration of media to portals, through which these worlds grow, "as alive in our thoughts as our own memories of

lived experience “(Wolf, 2012, p.2). Although the worlds we are experiencing may not be “real” in a tangible sense, they archive themselves into our brains and become memory.

Anemoia – Nostalgia for a time or place you have never experienced  
(Koeing, 2016)

When revisiting virtual worlds from your past, you may experience a sense of anemoia. Much like walking down the street of your childhood home. The term also proves the possibility of feeling nostalgic for a time you have not experienced first-hand, as you may have experienced it through media. Throughout *Ready Player One*, you can feel how Wade exhibits a sense of anemoia for the 80's as it is the time where most of his favourite media comes from. Baudrillard's explanation of the Hyperreal, further prove how this phenomenon functions. By understanding his theory on simulation and simulacra , we can understand how one might feel nostalgia for a simulated version of the past ( Baudrillard, 1994). Similarly, in real life, *Stranger Things* (2016) has caused a cultural shift, as its popularity caused nostalgia for a past, most of its audience never experienced. It is also interesting to note that this tv show centered around *Dungeons and Dragons*, which I have previously linked to the birth for virtual worlds. Thus, proving the cultural impact of virtual worlds, and creating nostalgia.

Memory and nostalgia for a virtual world prove its impact and its ability to act as a space to deal with grief. Grief and memory are interlinked. When someone close to you dies, all they leave behind is memories. With memory, you will often encounter nostalgia. Nostalgia and grief are therefore linked. One of the main themes within *Ready Player One* (2018) is nostalgia. On Wade's journey to find James Halliday's Easter egg, he encounters challenges which are filled with 1980's pop culture. The years of Halliday's youth. Virtual worlds for Generation Z are nostalgic.

Ryan Lizardi discusses the archiving and accessibility of media of our past (Lizardi, 2014). Being able to retrieve such specific fragments of childhood with a google search is a luxury afforded by the internet. Generation Z is the first fully online generation, which can dive in and out of their nostalgia with ease. Virtual worlds act as a collective second world, a virtual street played on by an entire generation across the globe. Younger generations are still experiencing this through games like *Roblox*. Virtual worlds are not going anywhere, so they must be studied as an integral part of growing up in an online generation.

## **Conclusion**

Virtual worlds such as the OASIS or the *Metaverse*, speak to the world we live in. They exist as a response to a declining world. An online escape to a second home that lives as a reality in our memories. The area of study is as endless as the possibilities within the worlds themselves, in fact it is as endless as the human imagination. Furthermore, interacting with virtual worlds is an example of both loss-oriented and restoration-oriented activity, and therefore they act as an aid for dealing with grief.

## Chapter 3 – Transformation

### Introduction

In this chapter I will be exploring the transformation of Wade Watts. I will be using semiotics and filmic analysis to do this. Throughout the film Wade grows to become a better person, this demonstrates the dual process model discussed in Chapter 2. As he grows to become a better person, he grows around his grief and his past. For the purpose of this essay character growth = growth around grief.

### Isolation- Home



Figure 14 *The Stacks* (Spielberg, 2018)

We must begin with the home because as stated by Gaston Bachelard in his key text *The Poetics of Space*, “the home shapes our subsequent knowledge of other spaces” (Bachelard, 1994, p.128). We can imagine the home as a vessel which tells the stories for our past. Understanding Wade’s home gives us insight as to how he views the world. We will see how the home shapes his views on the world. The home cannot be analysed only as an object (Bachelard, 1994, p.128). It is an amalgamation of shared memories, experiences, and dreams (Bachelard, 1994, 128-131). This image is chaotic and uneasy. The trailer sits atop scaffolding. The framework for this home is unstable, if

one home collapses, the rest fall like dominos. There are wires strung from trailer to trailer. It is unorganized. The image is grey and cold. The materials present are various metals and plastics. It is fabricated and industrial. These are not characteristics of “a humble home “as discussed by Bachelard (Bachelard, 1994, p.129). But they are a representation of Wade’s past, a dystopian view on what the home could become.



*Figure 15 Aunt Alice fighting with her boyfriend in the kitchen while Wade watches (Spielberg, 2018)*

Earlier in the scene we see that it is the same room as the living room. The kitchen connects the bedrooms to the living room. It is the meeting point where people leaving the living space collide with those leaving the bedroom. It is where private space becomes public space. The argument erupts within the communal space, setting a tone for the nature of the relationship. In some homes arguments might be confined to the private space. Furthermore, we can look at Wade’s position in the frame. He is a spectator, almost external, it is representative of the role he takes up within the family. He likely feels like a burden given to his aunt, as he watches a revolving door of men come into his aunt’s life. He further isolates himself by spending most of his time within the OASIS. His quest to find James Halliday’s easter egg is his ticket out. At this point in time Wade seems to believe that all his problems would be solved by money. Wade states that if he won the competition he would

“Buy a huge mansion, buy a bunch of cool shit – not be poor”. We can see his dreams and aspirations are a direct result of his circumstances within the home.

### The Hunt – The Keys



*Figure 16 Anorak showing the three keys (Spielberg, 2018)*

This is where Wade's transformation begins. For Wade to find the egg, he must find three keys. The keys will unlock a portal to the egg. Each key is representative of a life lesson, only solvable if your intention to win the competition is pure. The Wade Watts we see in the beginning of the film, motivated by money alone, would not survive the series of tests which lie ahead. Why three keys? Three is often regarded as a “magical” number. Three little pigs, three bears, three wishes, etc. Then there are philosophical threes, past, present, future and birth, life and death. The keys represent both, as James Halliday is telling a story through his keys, which rely on the players knowledge of pop culture. The use of magical keys, portals and golden eggs, is representative of his own fantastical tale. The keys also represent transformation, they represent James Halliday's transformation, the plays are looking at his past, on a journey in the present to unlock their future.



## The Copper Key



*Figure 17 Anorak gives Parzival the first key (Spielberg, 2018)*

The copper key was earned through a race which was won by going backwards. You need to look back to move forward. This represents the past, and history. History serving as a cautionary tale, so the same mistakes are not repeated. Halliday is telling the players to look back on his life, and find his mistakes, which will lead them to the next clue. The material in which the key is made from, copper, which is another word for pennies, an introduction into the theme of materialism and consumerism within the film. The OASIS cost only twenty-five cents, as it was intended to emulate the price of arcade games. Something which was important to Halliday and his co-founder Ogden Morrow, it was a nod to their humble beginnings, and they wanted the game to be



accessible to all. The copper key can also represent Wade's past, monetary motivation.



Figure 18 Wade getting into his car (Spielberg, 2018)

Wade's avatar Parzival can be seen in the image above driving a DeLorean, from the film *Back to The Future* (1985). Which is another nod to going backwards to move forward.

### The Jade Key



Figure 19 Art3mis receiving the second key (Spielberg, 2018)

The jade key was earned by dancing with Karen Underwood, Halliday's first and only unrequited love. Winning this key required the player to take a leap of faith, which he could not make. This key is located in a

replica of *The Shining* (1980), the movie he took her to. Symbolically, the horror genre is representative of fear, James Halliday's biggest fear was not the movie itself but kissing a girl. Halliday realised way too late in life, that he should have danced, he should have kissed the girl, taken the leap. This riddle unlike the first was not solved by Wade, it was solved by Art3mis, the girl he professes his love to before even meeting her in real life. This shows the difference between Wade and Halliday, leaving Art3mis to take the leap, and solve the riddle first because she had similar fears whilst Wade's blind leap in professing himself to her shows his immaturity. He does not know what love is, he just thinks he does. According to the Gemmological Association of Great Britain, jade can be a metaphor for "Heaven and Earth". Wade is heaven, he has his head in the clouds, and Art3mis is grounded and down to earth. Another meaning for jade is harmony, together they balance each other out, and without each other, the clue would remain unsolved. This key taught them about the importance of love, and human connection.

### The Crystal Key



*Figure 20 Parzival receiving the final key (Spielberg, 2018)*

The final key is perhaps the most personal of all. Once again, the riddle given by Halliday is a lesson to be learned from. This Key represents his past, and more significantly the nostalgia for it. He uses numbers from media he finds nostalgic; 42, the meaning of life, according to *The Hitchhikers Guide to The Galaxy* (1979), divided by three, our magic number, and magic according to *schoolhouse rock!* (1973). That gives you fourteen, the fourteenth sector, the sector the last key was on, the one where Halliday built his sanctuary. Halliday even states that this is where he felt most at home. His fortress was a heterotopic reflection of the home (Foucault, 1967). It is where the final piece of the puzzle lies, where the player achieves the ability to unlock the ultimate power, ownership of the OASIS. It reflects an idealised reality, therefore imbedding it as a heterotopia (Foucault, 1967).

It is only fitting that the beginning of Wade's transformation begins with the home, whilst Halliday's transformation ends with it. We will see Halliday's connection to home further explored later. *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, is just the kind of pop culture Halliday would include in his clue, a very analytical and calculated answer to something that is innately human, the meaning of life. The reason he is using three, a magical number is a juxtaposition of the calculated nature of the first number. Why three, because three is magic, that is all there is to it. Three keys, simply because to a young James Halliday watching *schoolhouse rock*, he was told three is the magic number. Furthermore, according to Miriam Webster (2024), the Greek origin of crystal is *krustallos* 'ice, crystal.' The planet this takes place on is covered in snow, so it is another clue to where the key is hidden. More importantly crystal is fragile, whilst jade and copper have durability, this could represent Halliday's future, fragile mortality. His future is crystal clear, because he's dead and he knows that because for the competition to be triggered he would have to be. Finally, the way that this key is won is by playing the first ever game to include an easter egg. The way to win, is not by winning the game, but by finding the

easter egg in the game. Halliday uses this as a metaphor for life, the answer to life, is not money or 42, it is the exploration of life, the journey which is the real prize. The three keys are the journey, they are the real prize. Because now Halliday can be sure that whoever completed his three quests, have a better understanding of life, have learned from his lessons, and will not take the power from the egg for granted. This is how we know Wade truly evolved and is a better person than before he earned any of the keys.

### Connection – The Iron Giant



*Figure 21 Aech controlling a replica of the Iron Giant next to Parzival and Sho in front of Castle Anorak (Spielberg, 2018)*

Wade could not have gone on this journey without his friendships. From them he learns selflessness and bravery. This image shows Wade as his avatar Parzival with his friends, Aech and Sho. Aech is in a mech they created which is intended to be a replica of The Iron Giant from the film by the same name released in 1999. The Iron Giant was based on a novel called The Iron Man (1968) written by Ted Hughes, to help his children grieve the loss of their mother, Sylvia Plath (Kerslake, 2021). This represents the theme of grief and loss throughout the film. In this case, the Iron Giant plays a pivotal role in helping Wade reach the end and win the egg. Throughout the film, we see the importance of Wade's

friends, as they come to his rescue, they always show up for him and he does the same for them. He is mostly changed by his relationship with Art3mis who is not pictured above. She is risking her real life, in order to deactivate the forcefield around Castle Anorak. This shows her willingness to the cause. Her acts of bravery encourage Wade to be a better person and make it to the end of the journey for something greater than wealth.

#### Reward – The Easter Egg



*Figure 22 The Easter Egg (Spielberg, 2018)*

The solution to all of Wade's problems, except now he has no family, all that was left behind by his idol, James Halliday is this egg. The meaning behind the hunt was so much more, he wanted to prove himself to Halliday, even though he is not alive anymore. The room in this image represents everything Wade could have; he can afford to have walls made of gold instead of ones plastered in decades old wallpaper. The egg is guarded by two snakes. Snakes often represent, evil, lies and deceit. From the very first book of the bible, the serpent tempts Eve with the apple. These serpents are tempting Wade with the egg. Moreover, the egg itself is golden. Aesop's fable, "The Goose That Laid the Golden Eggs", tells the tale of greed and impatience. This is Halliday's final test. The egg is presented in a way that is grand, and fantastical, a representation of the half a trillion dollars Wade would win

if he signed the contract right then and there. But something was off, Wade thought there had to be something more, he realises the prize is not the egg it was the keys, the journey. Halliday's avatar is pleased with Wade and takes him to the real egg.



*Figure 23 A recreation of James Halliday holding the real easter egg (Spielberg, 2018)*

The real egg is hidden in a replica of Halliday's Childhood bedroom, where you see Halliday as a child playing video games in his room, and now Halliday is no longer his avatar. He is himself. He is showing himself as his past and future. Furthermore, his choice to reveal the egg in his childhood bedroom, again shows his love for nostalgia, even though he did not feel at home, or of the same world as everyone else, his bedroom is where the creation of the OASIS began, the beginning of Halliday's transformation, going backwards to move forward. And it is the end of Wade's transformation.





*Figure 24 A recreation of a young James Halliday looking at a "Game Over" screen (Spielberg, 2018)*

## **Conclusion**

Wade's journey and growth allowed him to grow his world around his grief. Growing from his grief through his escape to the OASIS allowed him to find greater meaning in his real life. As the owner of the OASIS, he chose to have it shut down on Tuesdays and Thursdays, so they get out and explore life, real life.

"Reality is the only thing that is real"

Wade Watts quoting James Halliday

## Conclusion

Gaming is an escapist's internal Oasis. A place where people can "heal" whilst grieving, where people can be transformed or a place where someone can simply be whilst they attempt to understand an unimaginable loss. Through understanding grief methods such as the DPM, we can better understand how to cope with grief in a positive way. While still allowing ourselves to experience the loss. Whilst linking grief and gaming isn't a new concept, it is not a large area of study and this should change. The world of *Ready Player One* shows that video games can be for anyone, that it is a media just like any other and can be enjoyed by all ages. The increasing accessibility to video games hopefully broadens people's minds to what they could be and allows people to shed their stigmatised views towards it. And in turn shed those same negative views towards escapism.

My analysis of virtual worlds and linking our world to the world of *Ready Player One*, shows the importance of studying games, as it affects the entirety of Generation Z. Furthermore, that gaming be viewed more seriously as a form of socialisation, especially during times when socialisation in person is not possible.

Films such as *Ready Player One* also help to reach broader audiences especially with renowned director Stephen Spielberg attached to the project. The use of video games as an aid to deal with grief doesn't feel like a work of science fiction, but a step towards a more optimistic future. A future where we can identify and deal with our emotions seamlessly, because they are destigmatised, because they are discussed in widespread media, because it is written about. It is important that we move towards a future where we can see the positive impact of video games, and not the violent tradition.



Throughout Wade's journey we see him transform, as he uses gaming to cope with his grief, proving that the DPM works at least in a fictional world. Furthermore, having linked this fictional world to our own adds viability to the theory.

Grief is a deeply personal emotion and difficult to track and study, this is a great limitation. The reason gaming functions as an aid for grief is that it is a place of comfort for many, however for others it is unexplored and offers no comfort. Whilst going through times of uncertainty, exploring the world of gaming may be daunting and wouldn't prove helpful towards better understanding their emotions. However, it could be an interesting area of study, exploring gaming as an escape you've never experienced, perhaps the uncertainty improves its effectiveness as an escape. The foreign nature of the way narrative is portrayed within games could grow one's view of the world exponentially, as like I said it is so foreign. Much like how travel is said to expand your world views.

The gaps in my research are mainly with the analysis of the film, as I believe this film is so densely packed with signs, symbols, and easter eggs. The analysis would be never ending, further emphasizing how great a narrative device video games can be. There is much left unsaid within this thesis about the theme of nostalgia within *Ready Player One*, as the topic alone could be its own thesis. Moreover, I left out more scientific studies and practical applications for virtual reality, more specifically medical applications as it is outside of my area of study. Further research into these fields could be beneficial to the viability of this thesis.

Grief and gaming are intrinsically linked, gaming offers an outlet for dealing with grief, and grief can be present as a theme within game worlds.

## Bibliography

Adams, D. (2009). *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Pan Macmillan.

Armstrong, R. (2012). *Mourning Films*. McFarland.

Baudrillard, J. (1994) *Simulacra and Simulation*. Translated by S. Glaser. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Bucher, J. (2017). *Storytelling for Virtual Reality*. Taylor & Francis.

Calleja, G. (2011). *In-Game*. MIT Press.

Cline, E. (2011). *Ready Player One*. Crown Publishing Group.

“crystal-,” Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/crystal->. Accessed 12/20/2024.

*Donkey Kong* (1981) Arcade [game], Japan: Nintendo

Forcier, E. and Ravy, T. (2019). *Words, worlds and narratives : transmedia and immersion*. Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press.

Foucault, M. (1984). *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias*. Translated by J. Miskowiec.

Fried, EW 2005, *Inwardness and Morality*, BRILL, Boston. Available from: ProQuest Ebook Central. [20 December 2024].

Grodal, T., Dolf Zillmann and Vorderer, P. (2008). *Media entertainment : the psychology of its appeal*. Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.

Harrer, S. (2019). *Games and Bereavement : How Video Games Represent Attachment, Loss, and Grief*. Bielefeld: transcript-Verlag.

Izod, J, & Dovalis, J 2015, *Cinema As Therapy : Grief and Transformational Film*, Taylor & Francis Group, Oxford. Available from: ProQuest Ebook Central. [13 February 2025].

Kerslake, L. (n.d.). *The Iron Man*. [online] The Ted Hughes Society. Available at: <https://thetedhughessociety.org/ironman>.

Koenig, J. (2016). *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*. [online] Available at: <https://www.obscuresorrows.com> [Accessed 31 January 2025].

Leticia Glocer Fiorini, Thierry Bokanowski and Lewkowicz, S. (2009). *On Freud's 'Mourning and melancholia'*. London: Karnac.

Lizardi, R 2014, *Mediated Nostalgia : Individual Memory and Contemporary Mass Media*, Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, Lanham. Available from: ProQuest E-book Central. [19 December 2024].

Lloyd, C.A. (2017). *Grief demystified : an introduction*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

MovieStarPlanet ApS (2009) *Movie Star Planet* PC [Game]

New Horizon Interactive (2005) *Club Penguin* PC [Game]

"Oasis." Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/oasis>. Accessed 18 Dec. 2024.

Piryankova, I 2015, *The Influence of a Self-Avatar on Space and Body Perception in Immersive Virtual Reality*, Logos Verlag Berlin, Berlin. Available from: ProQuest Ebook Central. [18 December 2024].

Roblox Corporation (2006) *Roblox* [Video Game]

Rogers, R. (2018). *HOW VIDEO GAMES IMPACT PLAYERS : the pitfalls and benefits of a gaming society*. Lanham: Lexington Books.

*Schoolhouse Rock!* (1973). [Television Show] ABC.

Spielberg S, *Ready Player One*. (2018). Warner Bros. Pictures.

Spokes, M. and Veal, C. (2024). 'I wasn't me, grieving in my room. I was Spiderman': gaming, loss and self-care following COVID-19. *Mortality*, [online] 0, pp.1–16.  
doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2024.2315961>.

*Stranger Things*, 2016. *Stranger Things*. [TV series] Directed by the Duffer Brothers. Netflix.

Stroebe, M.S., Schut, H.A.W., van den Bout, J. and Terheggen, M. (2001). *Handbook of bereavement research : consequences, coping, and care*. Washington, Dc: American Psychological Association, pp.705–737.

The Gemological Association of Great Britain. (2019). *Understanding Jade And Its Importance In China | Gem-A*. [online] Available at: <https://gem-a.com/jade-and-its-importance-in-china/>.

Wilkinson, A. (2018). *Ready Player One is a fun romp that's even more dystopian than it realizes*. [online] Vox. Available at: <https://www.vox.com/culture/2018/3/29/17171778/ready-player-one-review-nostalgia-dystopia> [Accessed 10 Jan. 2022].

Wolf, M.J.P. (2012). *Building imaginary worlds : the theory and history of subcreation*. New York: Routledge.

Yee, N 2014, *The Proteus Paradox : How Online Games and Virtual Worlds Change Us--And How They Don't*, Yale University Press, New Haven. Available from: ProQuest Ebook Central. [31 January 2025].

