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ENGL 2850

Congratulations! You Have an Extra Life!

Amidst the gloomy reality of the real world in 2045, James Halliday, a multibillionaire, leaves a hidden Easter Egg inside the simulated reality of the OASIS when he dies. The first person to find the Easter Egg will inherit Halliday's entire fortune, valued in excess of "two hundred and forty billion dollars" (4). In order to find the Egg and obtain Halliday's fortune, society becomes obsessed with studying and gaining extensive knowledge of *Anorak's Almanac*. This journal includes detailed descriptions of 1980s video games, movies, songs, popular culture, and Halliday's personal interests. Wade Watts, an eighteen-year-old boy from Oklahoma City, and countless others become fixated on finding the Easter Egg, calling themselves "gunters" and retreating into the digital sanctuary of the OASIS instead of confronting the problems of the real world. Although he exists in real-world America in 2045, Wade spends most of his time under the guise of his virtual avatar "Parzival" in the elaborate, simulated reality of the OASIS. Existing as a multitudinous and ephemeral entity, the OASIS is put in contrast to the singular real world and the irreplaceable individuals behind each avatar. Originally depicted as a utopic world that distracts people from reality, the OASIS morphs into a tool for surveillance, human connection, and mediation between the virtual and real world.

The real setting of *Ready Player One* is a bleak version of futuristic America that is left in shambles following the Global Energy Crisis. It is likened to a "grim apocalyptic reality" and a "dystopic wasteland of the real world" (Nordstrom 239, Aronstein 51). Due to a lack of resources, job opportunities, and viable land, many people are forced to live in vertical shantytowns called "stacks." Wade Watts, a product of this bleak world, has no siblings and no

parents. Wade lives with his aunt in the stacks, but frequently escapes to his junkyard hideout to log into the OASIS and avert the problems of the real world. The egg hunters exhaust their energy, money, time, and resources on the OASIS, mimicking the cultural trend of the 1980s for individuals to build “an identity on consuming rather than being” and “on an aesthetic life rather than ascetic living” as featured in a 1984 issue of *Newsweek* (Bleach 31). Wade refers to his “real life” as his life inside the OASIS while claiming that U.S. government officials in the real world are “rearranging deck chairs on the *Titanic*” (195, 201). At times, the real world is even viewed as a distraction to the OASIS. Wade vows not to go outside until he has completed his quest, and promises he will “abandon the real world altogether until I found the egg” (166). Life in real-world America is depicted as bleak and miserable in 2045. James Halliday’s fabricated creation, filled with popular culture, TV, movies, songs, and games provides a convenient and nostalgic escape from the real world.

The real world’s gloominess is tied to its singular, inescapable identity. The Global Energy Crisis plaguing the real world is a result of “burning fossil fuels, which came from dead plants and animals buried deep in the ground” (17). Because the world is depleted of its nonrenewable resources, it is barren and desolate. Unlike the OASIS, the real world is not simulated, so it cannot be escaped or replicated. As described in *Simulacra and Simulation*, the real universe “is what cannot be represented, what does not have a possible complement in the mirror” (Baudrillard 108). In other words, there is only one earth, and it is unduplicable. Its only mirrored form exists in the OASIS, a simulated reality, which is not real. In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin describes “The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity” (Benjamin 4). Because it cannot be replaced or copied, the real world has an authenticity or “aura” that the OASIS cannot possess (Benjamin 5).

The singularity of the real world, although bleak, is ultimately unavoidable except by superficial means.

The OASIS is presented as a foil to the miserable, impoverished reality of America in 2045. Created by James Halliday, the OASIS is originally depicted as a “digital utopia,” or as Wade describes it, “an escape hatch into a better reality” (Aronstein 53, Cline 18). Like the role of *soma* in *Brave New World*, the OASIS allows users an artificial escape from real-world pain and suffering. Wade confesses that when he feels depressed or frustrated about his lot in life, “all I had to do was tap the Player One button, and my worries would instantly slip away as my mind focused itself on the relentless pixelated onslaught on the screen in front of me” (14). Similar to Disneyland, the OASIS exists as a “deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate the fiction of the real in the opposite camp” (Baudrillard 13). This points to the simulated quality of the OASIS. When Wade professes his love to Art3mis, she tells him that he lives “inside this illusion” instead of the real world (186). The escapism and obsessive quest for the Easter Egg dominates and distracts the attention of those who live in an otherwise dismal world. In reality, the OASIS is not a “utopic alternative real world, but rather a digital illusion, an ‘enchantment’ that dupes the knight/hero” (Aronstein 60). The OASIS, a utopic metropolis, is often used to escape and avoid the problems of the real world.

In contrast to the lone existence of the real world, the OASIS contains endless reproductions, duplications, and copies. As illustrated by Wade, “The OASIS contained hundreds (and eventually thousands) of high-resolution 3-D worlds for people to explore, and each one was beautifully rendered in meticulous graphical detail” (57). He mentions 512 copies of the Zork Game, numerous replications of the Tyrell Building, 1,024 copies of the domed city Megadon, and countless identical male avatars used by every Sixer (228, 251, 261, 33). As

described in Coding the Grail: Ready Player One's Arthurian Mash-Up, "Flitting from one virtual world to the next, players flee a physical world of privation and stagnation, of oppression and isolation, for the promise of fulfillment and progress, power, and community" inside the OASIS (Aronstein 54). The endless duplicates of avatars, planets, and simulations in the OASIS differentiates the simulated reality from the singular and inescapable real world. As described by Benjamin, "By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence" (Benjamin 5). In contrast to the identical copy of Ludus that is coded with ease when it becomes overcrowded on the OASIS, it is impossible to make a duplicate copy of earth.

As a result of the OASIS's multiplicity, Wade is able to change and morph identities through his digital avatar, Parzival. Inside the OASIS, Parzival transforms into Wade3 at school, David Lightman from the movie *WarGames* and King Arthur in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* in his performance of Flicksyncs, and his robot alter egos, Leopardon and Ultraman during tense battle scenes. As described by Benjamin, "technical reproduction can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself" (Benjamin 4). However, through the performance of multiple roles and characters in the OASIS, Parzival's complex identity begins to influence Wade's identity in the real world. This is reiterated by Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulation*, when he says, "From a classical (even cybernetic) perspective, technology is an extension of the body" (Baudrillard 111). Wade describes his transformation and merging of identities when he says, "The lines of distinction between a person's real identity and that of their avatar began to blur" (60). Over the course of the story, Wade/Parzival "moves from inside to outside, from cyberspace to landscape, from digital body to physical body, from 'flickering signifier' to humanist individual" (Aronstein 53). Through his

pursuit of the Egg, Wade is able to develop a fluid identity between his online and his real-world persona.

Wade's famous online avatar, Parzival, allows him to transgress the social and geographical limitations of his real life identity. Through the OASIS, Parzival is able to meet friends and court his love interest, Art3mis. Through the digital mediation of the OASIS, Wade is able to "travel into space, experience high fantasy, attend lavish parties, or simply socialize with friends" (Nordstrom 239). Because of the democratizing effects of the OASIS interface and design, it allows players to connect regardless of gender, race, and sexuality. The High Five's unlikely friendship through their quest to find the Easter Egg mimics the cheesy storyline of a 1980s John Hughes chick flick that depicts a "pluralistic schoolyard where wealth was no longer an impediment to the interaction of previously segregated social strata" (Bleach 25-26). The OASIS even requires avatars to work together, as illustrated by the need to recite "'Three is a Magic Number'" and have three avatars present to open the Crystal Gate (342). The partnership and camaraderie fostered by the OASIS is also prevalent in other multiplayer videogames. The article "Life is Just a Game: The Rise of Video Games in American Culture" asserts that in real-world America, many students said "going online to join a networked game is a good way to meet people or socialize with friends" (Life 106). As described in "Coding the Grail: Ready Player One's Arthurian Mash-Up," "Parzival creates a community, an unlikely alliance of competing gangs and solo gunters, led by the game's high scorers" in order to win the Egg and defeat IOI (Aronstein 62). Although it is criticized for distracting individuals from their societal duties and responsibilities, the OASIS has the potential to foster connection and friendship, which translates into the real world.

As demonstrated through Wade and Parzival's converging identity, the real world and the OASIS also begin to overlap. The transgression of real and technological is explained in "Life is Just a Game: The Rise of Video Games in American Culture," which claims "the distinction between life and game grow grayer and more vague. We increasingly grow desensitized to the difference between simulation and reality" (Life 108). Through the use of video footage, IOI is able to bridge the gap between simulated reality and actual reality. Nolan Sorrento, a high-ranking executive at IOI threatens to blow up Wade's home, showing him "live video image" and "thermal-imaging" software that shows the number of people inside (142). Sorrento threatens, "Log out before I say it's OK, and your whole world goes boom," (144). When Wade logs out prematurely, Sorrento completes the order and Wade's home in the stacks explodes, killing everyone who lives there. IOI also tracks down and kills Daito in the real world, throwing his balcony off the forty-third floor of his apartment building in order to eliminate his avatar's virtual competition for the Egg (242). Although originally presented as an idealistic escape from the woes of reality, the OASIS becomes a tool for IOI to track, locate, and kill people linked to their avatar in the real world. The Sixers use real-life violence and intimidation while challenging the "OASIS's idyllic environment itself" (Nordstrom 244). As a powerful multiconglomerate corporation, IOI jeopardizes the OASIS's open-access availability to all while also putting the top scorers' real-world lives in danger.

After finding out that their real world identities are at risk and not just their virtual avatars, Parzival, Aech, Art3mis, and Shoto finally meet each other in person to successfully destroy IOI. As described in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," "Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be" (Benjamin 3). Even though the

OASIS allows Parzival, Aech, Art3mis, and Shoto to digitally connect, it lacks the “aura” provided by the real world. As a result, they all travel to Og Morrow’s house in Oregon to finally meet face-to-face. After Wade obtains Halliday’s Easter Egg, Halliday tells him that even though reality can be “terrifying and painful,” ultimately the real world is “the only place where you can find true happiness” (364). Parzival’s ultimate lesson lies in learning to “value the real world over the fictional” (Aronstein 59). Although they have talked and communicated for months, after Wade (Parzival) and Samantha (Art3mis) meet in person, he expresses that he has “absolutely no desire to log back into the OASIS” (372). Their final encounter implies a moving away from the simulacra of the OASIS, which is “founded on the image, on imitation and counterfeit” and a newfound priority of addressing the problems of the real world (Baudrillard 121). At the end of the novel, Wade begins to consider using the profits obtained from finding the Easter Egg to confront real world crises, and reiterates Art3mis’s desire to “make the world a better place” (371).

The OASIS is both a superficial escape from reality and a tool for IOI to locate and kill members of society. However, it is also a valuable asset used to facilitate genuine human interaction. Without their pursuit of the Easter Egg, Parzival, Aech, Art3mis, and Shoto would have no chance at connecting online or destroying IOI. Similar to the internet, video games, and various other forms of technology, the OASIS is a tool. It is not inherently “good” or “bad,” but the utility, danger, and productivity of the OASIS depends on the person behind each avatar. As a result, the OASIS represents an “imaginary world that is simultaneously utopian and dystopian” (Nordstrom 239). The OASIS, filled with duplicate planets, and artificial sensations is a simulacra of the real world. However, winning the Easter Egg hunt on the OASIS affords Wade the opportunity to socially advance and confront the pervading issues of the real world.

Through Wade's virtual victory, he provides all members of society with the chance to have a better life in the real world, illustrating the OASIS's ability to facilitate the convergence of the simulated and the real.

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