

The Push Against the Pull

by Breana Bagley

We immerse ourselves into the virtual world approximately five times every waking hour (Gregoire). What if roles were reversed and we only disconnected ourselves from the virtual world five times every waking hour? Our relationships were created and continued online through an appearance and personality that could or could not be your true self. Individualism is a cultural ideal, however, by creating ourselves into someone we are not, we are not truly being an individual (Ward). Placing ourselves into an environment where we feel we can be accepted because we are not our true self but someone we want to be or think others will accept, is corruption at the start. Throughout the novel *Ready Player One*, a constant battle of virtual reality or reality took place by accepting ideals such as capitalism, classism, and power structure that all led to the corruption of both the OASIS and reality.

In the novel *Ready Player One*, the main character, Wade, faces the battle of where is the better place to spend his time, either the OASIS or reality. Wade is an orphan who lives with his aunt and is ignored and abused throughout his life. He was born into the dystopian landscape of reality with no way to better himself. Escapism was Wade's obvious option, as most people were already escaping into the OASIS, an online virtual reality. In the OASIS, Wade has traditional young adult experiences and plenty of social interaction at any time without being judged for his actual appearance, as anonymity was a large benefit of the online utopia. Wade made his decision to devote himself to further his virtual life in the OASIS rather than drift around in the inhospitable surroundings of reality.

After the death of James Halliday, the cofounder of the OASIS, an Easter Egg hunt was announced. Halliday created a hunt where only someone as likeminded as him, would safely and responsibly hold the power of being able to shut down the entire virtual utopia. Halliday describes the hunt by saying, “Three hidden keys open three hidden gates. Wherein the errant will be tested for worthy traits and those with the skill to survive these straits, will reach the end where the prize awaits” (Cline 6). Halliday made sure to create the hunt as one that would only be completed by someone who holds the same values and traits which are required to retain his entire inheritance, complete control of the OASIS’ existence, and keeping the OASIS out of the hands of the greedy internet company, the IOI (Innovative Online Industries).

The IOI is the world’s largest internet provider, including internet for the OASIS, who wished to monopolize the world’s virtual utopia. Wade confides in the hunt as he sees this opportunity as one to discover himself as a person, after being lost in the real world for so long. Having a connection with Halliday of video games being their escapism and their self-revolution, Wade is even more determined to discover the egg. Wade explains why he feels the need to escape from reality by saying, “My generation had never known a world without the OASIS. To us, it was much more than a game or an entertainment platform. It had been an integral part of our lives for as far back as we could remember. We’d been born into an ugly world, and the OASIS was our one happy refuge” (Cline 46). The OASIS is all his generation has ever known because those before him gave up on improving reality and instead let it slip into the current dystopia.

Wade captured the egg which resulted in him holding all the power, even over those of much higher class than him, breaking through the restraints of classism. Through his journey, Wade realized that virtual reality is better than reality. Virtual reality can be destroyed just as

quickly as reality so when need to start fixing reality before we are left without an environment to exist in.

The environment of reality now looks more like a dystopian waste land than a place for life to occur. Wade describes the world he lives in physically and mentally by saying, “A thick film of neglect . . . covered everything in sight. The streets, the buildings, the people” (Cline 59). His surroundings include overpopulated cities, food shortages, and deserted landscapes. Reality suffered from deep seeded neglect. Once all the fossil fuels the Earth had to offer were used up, by the IOI fighting to keep all power, everyone resorted to the OASIS to escape, instead of cleaning up their mess of a world. Wade wishes someone would tell everyone, “Human civilization is in a ‘decline.’ Some even say it’s ‘collapsing’” (Cline 18). The grand global civilization that was carefully crafted many years ago, is greatly declining, in fact, there is little livable civilization left.

Capitalist ideologies are seen throughout the novel as everything is a competition. In order to get respectable job you must be of a certain class, pertain a certain look, and be an exact image of what the company wants. Competition is thought to be healthy by capitalists because “only the most capable and the most intelligent will rise to the top” (Tyson 114). However, when some many individuals are disregarded because they are not given the opportunity to rise, there is an imbalance in power. Those in poverty and those not in high power, had to fight for everything, from food to shelter. Survival of the fittest was instilled by the dystopian reality which is what led many to turn to the OASIS. In the OASIS, it was thought that everyone was put on a level playing field, something many wanted so badly to feel; equal. This sense of competition is what I believe had such influence on the creation of the OASIS.

The location of living in this dystopia was classifying one on their social status. If you lived in “the stacks” it was obvious that financials were an issue for your family. The stacks was an area where all poverty-stricken families lived. Trailers were stacked sky high on top of one another. Wade described his living situation by saying, “a sprawling hive of discolored tin shoeboxes rusting on the shores of I-70” (Cline 21). The vision of swarms of people crawling out of their homes and climbing down countless stories, using others’ homes to assist their descent, is dismaying.

What is even more saddening being the fact that so many opportunities are unreachable for the citizens that live in such an environment. Those who live in the stacks live their due to poverty. Wade’s neighbor in the stacks explained, “They were now scattered around the outskirts of most major cities, each one overflowing with uprooted rednecks like my parents, who – desperate for work, food, electricity, and reliable OASIS access – had fled their dying small towns” (Cline 21). Only the richest could afford to live within the city and the rest were pushed to the outskirts. Here they are unable to find sufficient work and can only find work that pays well below what it takes to run a household. Desperate times call for desperate measures and society takes advantage of those in a desperate position. Due to these stipulations, young adults like Wade were never given a chance to grow and do better for themselves. Wade realized this as he noted, “If and when I finally escaped from the stacks, I'd never look back” (Cline 103). Wade doesn’t want to be associated with stack living or the current situation of the world he lives in. However, when he escaped to the utopia, the OASIS, once Wade succeeded in capturing the egg, he broke the barrier of classism. He was from the lowest class but now holds all of the power in the world.

Wade escaped the dystopia he was born into by logging into the OASIS every day for most of his waking moments. The persona of being able to escape reality where you have no choice but to appear as you are, is a main advertising point, as Thomas Foster from the University of Wisconsin Press, explains, “Advertisements are celebrating computer-mediated communication in explicitly utopian terms. Typically, such advertisements stress the obsolescence of physical appearance and bodily markers of difference: cyberspace, the imaginary site of social interactions conducted through networked computers, is a "place" where gender, race, and physical disability cease to matter, we are told” (Foster). Essentially, Foster is pointing out that virtual reality is made out to be so appealing, by using our insecurities against us. Appearance is often a factor that many wish we could alter or enhance certain aspects. Foster also explains that we can change our whole identity. We can become a different gender, skin tone, or be an able citizen. To Wade, the OASIS is a utopia because he is stripped of his stereotype. Wade is no longer the poor kid overweight gamer who sleeps in the laundry room of his trailer in the stacks, but is instead a muscular young man who is book smart and OASIS smart. Wade explains what value concealment has by saying, “Anonymity was one of the major perks of the OASIS” (Cline 28). Anonymity gives any player the idea that they will be able to defy the stereotypes against them that may hold them back, which will give them a chance to succeed in not only gaming but also life. By giving an opportunity to excel without factors working against the individual, the virtual world is a utopia, unlike their current reality.

The OASIS may seem like a utopian environment from afar, but truthfully, the OASIS is becoming a clone of the current dystopian reality. The OASIS has been the predetermined power structure for much of Wade’s life. It is a known fact that a powerful position in the OASIS is worth so much more than in the dystopian reality. Marxism rejects that power is given to the

ones with the greatest socioeconomic and class relations. Halliday did not intend for the OASIS to be the ultimate power structure that it evolved into as his reasoning for creating the virtual game was to escape those who fed into the ultimate power structure in reality, like the IOI. However, the IOI followed into the OASIS and took advantage of the ways their power and money could get them ahead to once again, obtain the utmost power.

The IOI only wanted to take control of the Oasis in order to use it to produce revenue. One company should not be allowed to run the entire world, including virtual reality, Marxist theory agrees, as the company would be othering one specific group of people. The IOI would block the poverty part of the world, which in the world's dystopian state is much of it, cutting much of the population from their access to the escapism that those who can afford it get to indulge in.

The OASIS is widening the gap between the rich and the poor, also known as the digital divide (Soltan). Creating technology that holds educational information, such as the OASIS due to the amount of schooling and technology provided to help their students, but comes at a cost that restricts the poverty part of society from using, is depriving those of being successful. If this digital divide continues to worsen, there would be no escape from reality as Wade describes the OASIS would become, "The moment IOI took over; the OASIS would cease to be the open-source virtual utopia I'd grown up in. It would become a corporate run dystopia, an overpriced theme park for wealthy elitists" (Cline 33). In other words, the Oasis would become a duplicate version of the dystopian reality everyone is currently attempting to escape. If the IOI would have gotten its hands on the egg, instead of Wade, it would have single handedly run the entire world. The IOI would have turned the OASIS into a monopoly, charging for access monthly, plastering advertisements everywhere, and taking away the most valuable asset, anonymity.

Throughout the OASIS, classism was prevalent in the virtual world. Families and individuals were classified, by the clothing they were wearing. If you were dressed in the default clothing it was noted that you couldn't afford other clothing, as the OASIS used actual money to buy intangible items. For instance, Todd13, an OASIS classmate of Wade, pointed out in the hallway, "Great outfit, slick. Where did you snag the sweet threads" (Cline 29)? Wade was dressed in a default skin of a black t-shirt and blue jeans. The claim that the OASIS allows players to advance in opportunities they would otherwise not have, isn't exactly true. Poverty players like Wade are still placed in a class and judged from that class belonging. The ability to enforce classism, was put into effect by those in power who made the OASIS have the capability by creating a virtual world where all is said to be equal but has created ways that others could have better than those less fortunate.

Marxism doesn't agree "the social world is governed by immutable law" (Clark & York). Instead, Marxism is advocating for needed change and adhering to that chance. As time has evolved in the OASIS, the structures need to evolve with time. Power hungry tendencies crept their way in by using capitalism, classism, and power structures. The OASIS is no different than the dystopian reality everyone is trying to escape.

Once Halliday realized the form of power he had created, he felt ashamed which I believe is the reasoning behind his ten-year hibernation before his death. He spent this time preparing to clean up the shambled world by creating the hunt. He knew that anyone who would be able to reach the egg would have to have the same ideals that he carried and would see what corruption the OASIS has become. Halliday knew that the next OASIS overseer would be able to hold the power of knowing when and if to shut the OASIS down forever. Once Wade receives all power in Halliday's office, he tells him "Don't make the same mistake I did. Don't hide forever" (Cline

364). Halliday doesn't want Wade to hide from reality forever. He has witnessed what the OASIS started as and currently has evolved into and knows it's only a matter of time before it will cease to exist. Starting a life within reality ahead of time will keep Wade from turning into a mass powerhouse. Wade's first step in completing this task given to him by Halliday was by saying, "We're going to use all the moolah we just won to feed everyone on the planet. We're going to make the world a better place" (Cline 371). Wade starts his journey by repairing the Earth. As he starts to repair it is my hope as well as Halliday and Wade's hope, that others will follow and a chain reaction will be created. Just like the chain reaction of "pass it forward" that is used in today's society, a few small good deeds will not only help a few others but get others to help also.

Halliday explained the reason the OASIS was created by saying, "I created the OASIS because I never felt at home in the real world. I didn't know how to connect with the people there. I was afraid, for all of my life. Right up until I knew it was ending. That was when I realized, as terrifying and painful as reality can be, it's the only place where you can find true happiness. Because reality is real" (Cline 364). Halliday created the OASIS has a way to be able to fit in how he wanted to. He was able to push past stereotypes that he received as a kid, much the same as Wade, and could connect with others without judgment. He was too afraid to break these barriers in real life, in his real skin, so went to the OASIS to do so. Halliday thought we would find happiness being able to be authentic, however, he was never actually authentic as he portrayed himself as someone he wasn't. This is a barrier that he failed to break and wanted Wade to break it. Happiness can't be found pretending you are someone who are not. Halliday is telling us, in today's society, that happiness cannot be found by pretending we are someone we

are not, personality wise. We can't just change our skin but we can twist our inner being. True satisfaction will only come from true being and true acceptance.

Wade's opinion of if reality or virtual reality is better. The entire Easter Egg hunt was perhaps Halliday's way of instilling trust in whoever was wise enough to reach that point of the hunt, that Halliday used the OASIS as an escape also. Halliday never felt accepted or comfortable in the real world but that doesn't mean that virtual reality is the solution. Virtual reality was infected, just as reality was, with traits such as capitalism, classism, and power structure that turned a place of protection into a place of competition. In just a push of the big red button, the population's entire day to day life could be shut down forever and every bit of code erased so it could never be an escape again. Wade understood Halliday's vision of fixing the world, by simply existing in it and getting others to believe in reality, again. *Ready Player One* is a plea of Ernest Cline's for Americans, today, to act on preserving our society by growing with change, giving all proper opportunities, and refusing to monopolize our daily lives.

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