Diversity is Not Inclusion:
An Analysis of *Ready Player One* and the Current State of Discrimination
in the Online Gaming World

by Tyler Haub

Due to recent pushes by millennials and the creation of independent media outlets, we as a nation and as a global environment have been almost required to include a more diverse subject matter other than the "white man." In the end of Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One*, Cline extends a hand to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and plus (LGBTQ+) community by revealing that Aech, the main character's best gamer friend, is actually a lesbian woman. However, having a character that is a part of the LGBTQ+ community and being inclusive to the LGBTQ+ community are completely separate outcomes. Even though Aech's reveal is a plot point of the story, her character is not influenced by her sexuality or even the fact that she is a woman. While *Ready Player One* does create a more diverse experience for readers, the experience is not inclusive due to the heteronormative romance that intertwines its greasy fingers into the plot of the novel, the blatant sexism shown toward Art3mis by both Wade and Aech, and the fact that it unfortunately mirrors the current discrimination of the LGBTQ+ community during online gaming.

The first point of fault that Cline makes is the rhetoric used by not only all gunters and gamers, but also Wade himself. Even though it is meant to incite an idea of amusement for the reader, Wade says, "Your mom bought them for me… [text omitted]…Tell her I said thanks, the next time you stop at home to breast-feed and pick up your allowance" (Cline 30). Even though "your mom" jokes have been used (mainly by middle schoolers) to insult people, it still shows us that Wade views sexualizing another person's mother and a strong bond between a mother and

son to be viewed as a weakness. Another instance of this is when Wade confronts I-r0k in Aech's basement after I-r0k said a statement about *Star Wars* being "played out:"

> 'That's right, I called you a poseur, poseur.' I stood and got up in
> his grille. 'You're an ignorant know-nothing twink. Just because
> you're fourteenth-level, it doesn't make you a gunter. You actually
> have to possess some *knowledge*.' (Cline 43)

These are both instances where the general public would just see these as general insults, meaningless and harmless to everyone. However, in both of these insults, Wade actually undermined the existence of other identities. In the first example, it was women. Now, by calling and insulting his arch nemesis by saying the word "twink" is actually demeaning to a subculture within the gay community specifically. A twink is a slender and young gay male, usually hairless and is sometimes seen as less in the gay community because they are less manly and more feminine. By using twink as an insult, he was saying that being a twink is all-in-all a bad thing. Wade was also targeted for enjoying *Ladyhawke* by Aech when he says:

> I don't care if Spielberg directed it. It's a chick flick disguised as a
> sword-and-sorcery picture. The only genre film with less balls is
> probably…freakin' *Legend*. Anyone who actually enjoys
> *Ladyhawke* is a bona fide USDA-choice pussy! (Cline 41)

To use the words of President-elect Trump, this is seen by most as "locker room talk" and nothing to be offended about. But for the whiney millennial like me, this quote is so much more. First of all, Aech describes the movie as a chick flick in an attempt to discredit the movie as actually important. This means that anything that is intended for women should be seen as less important. He then uses the idea of "balls" to rank literature, from the most balls being the best

literature, to the least amount of balls. To sum the entire insult up, he ends with stating that anyone who enjoys a ball-less chick flick, such as *Ladyhawke*, is no better than the entrance to a woman's reproductive organs. This analysis is much more unlikely to receive a laugh, or really anything other than uncomfortable silence from those who see nothing wrong by what was said. While I understand that we grow up hearing these kinds of sayings from the media and our parents, it does not justify the fact, whether consciously or not, viewing something as female-related is the same as viewing it as subpar.

Cline paints Wade as just your average teenage boy who is having a difficult time fitting in, "Year after year, my eyes would scan the lunchroom like a T-1000, searching for a clique that might accept me. I was too weird, even for the weirdos" (Cline 31). This is more than enough of a clue that Wade had almost no sociability in the real world and found it hard to talk to people. Directly after this, Wade explains:

> And girls? Talking to girls was out of the questions. To me, they
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> were like some exotic alien species, both beautiful and terrifying.
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> Whenever I got near one of them, I invariably broke out in a cold
>
> sweat and lost the ability to speak in complete sentences. (Cline
>
> 31)

While this does tend to be the narrative for most boys going through adolescence, where is the originality? Not only do we have a main character that likes to throw around gay slang to insult his enemies, but he is also the most stereotypical cis-white male character you could create. This is not a call for Wade to be gay, bi, or transgender, but rather a call for originality. It is not that this narrative is unrelatable, but if we continue to perpetuate this as the average adolescent boy then where do the others fit in? What about the boy that does not have a problem talking to girls or

even prefers to be in their company over boys? All he sees is literature telling him that it is supposed to be awkward for him to talk to girls and it will probably make him feel as though he is doing something wrong. This is a toxic storyline that has intertwined itself into almost all pop culture, furthering gender separations by exotically othering women with young male characters. This is especially true with Wade's first description of Art3mis, his biggest cyber-crush:

> Art3mis's body was also somewhat unusual. In the OASIS, you usually saw one of two body shapes on female avatars: the absurdly thin yet wildly popular supermodel frame, or the top-heavy, wasp-waisted porn starlet physique (which looked even less natural in the OASIS than it did in the real world). But Art3mis's frame was short and Rubenesque. All curves. (Cline 35)

This section proves that not only does Wade still put more emphasis on a woman's appearance, but so does the entire world. The OASIS is a space where you literally get to redefine yourself and choose every little aspect about you to show other people. Even with all of the options in the universe, people are still opting to do one of two predetermined body types for female characters because it is what people think of as attractive. Except for Art3mis of course, because she is not like all of the other OASIS girls (heavy sarcasm). The sexism is also shown in the amount of text used to describe Art3mis compared to other more important main male characters like Aech. While there were six paragraphs in a row explaining things from how Art3mis looked to what she was interested in, the description of Aech is limited to, "Aech's avatar was a tall, broad-shouldered Caucasian male with dark hair and brown eyes" (Cline 38). This even shows how much more Cline believes in the importance of a woman's physical appearance, especially a woman that the main character has a crush on.

Even if you do not see a problem with having characters like these in books because Cline is just creating them, the unfortunate truth is that it directly correlates with the way minorities are actually treated in the gaming community. Before I started my research into the ways that different minority groups are discriminated against in the gaming community, I sat down with Brandon Lane to get a general idea of the topic. Brandon is a current sophomore at Millikin University studying Vocal Music Education. He is involved in many organizations on campus, but loves playing video games with his TKE brothers. When Brandon was in high school, he came out to his parents as homosexual. Currently, Brandon's favorite online multiplayer game is *Overwatch*, a first- person shooter game with immense customization and strategy required to win the objectives. However, even with his passion for meeting and connecting with people around the globe through video games, he says he rarely uses his microphone function while playing unless he has them on his friend's list:

> It's probably because I feel…I don't know. I feel uncomfortable
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> talking to people, especially over a microphone, because I feel like
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> a large portion of the gaming community is against or not super
>
> accepting of gay people. (Lane)

Based on past experiences of companies trying to incorporate LGBTQ+ themes and the reactions by people from the gaming community, there is a lot of fact behind Brandon's words. After a leaked YouTube video of *Mass Effect 3* in-game play showing the gay relationship option (and the most graphic part of this relationship being two men cuddling in only underwear), the comments on the video ranged from "Shepard was my hero, now my eyes are bleeding" to "…homosexuality is just a way to weed out the weak, and useless. Sorry fags but the men get to procreate, and you homos can sit in the corner playing with your skirts and make-up"

(MacKnight 1). This kind of hatred does not only take place on secondary sites, but also in the gameplay itself. This stems from the user's ability to hide behind their microphone:

> I think that people over microphones are more willing to be like…
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> I don't know just to randomly come at you and insult you for being
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> gay and like, I don't know this person. I've never met this person
>
> and I'm not interested in that. (Lane)

The worst part of it all is that the way some companies try to discourage this type of behavior is by advising LGBTQ+ gamers to not advertise the fact that are LGBTQ+. A World of Warcraft (WoW) player advertised an LGBTQ-friendly guild in a public chat in 2006 (Shaw 69). Shortly after, an administrator for Blizzard, the company owner of the game, sent her a warning then suspended her account for apparently violating the WoW sexual harassment policy. This is just an introduction to the oversexualization of the LGBTQ+ characters.

One of the roots of these problems is how LGBTQ+ characters are portrayed when they actually are included in video games. Most of the time, they play minor or secondary roles but are extremely stereotyped. Usually to signify that a male character is gay, he will be extremely flamboyant and either dress or talk femininely. Adrienne Shaw states:

> Even as the game-industry and –complex reflect in some ways a
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> gradual growing cultural acceptance, gaymers often struggle to
>
> establish their digital presence while they simultaneously attempt
>
> to resist the stigmatization of a hyper-sexualized profile at odds
>
> with a media-industry positioned against sexual presence. (4)

To drive her point home, Shaw uses this analogy; we are perfectly fine seeing Mario save *Princess* Peach, but we would think about it differently if he was saving *Prince* Peach. More than likely, it

would be viewed to be a statement about sexuality, rather than one individual saving another. To add on to this, the gaming industry is driven by making a profit over being culturally inclusive, so making a video game that consumers might view as making a statement about sexuality is not in their best interest. Shaw states that this assumed homophobia of their consumers and the "fear of negative reception and poor sales revenue, [is] a situation leading to further gay exclusion and under-representation" (7). Another common trend of game characters in the LGBTQ+ community is for them to be villains and usually insane (The Gamer Theorists). Trevor from *Grand Theft Auto V*, is implied to be a bisexual, but is also bipolar and abuses people regularly. Alfred Ashford from *Resident Evil Code Veronica* is gay, but is a chaotically evil mentally-unstable super villain. The most egregious of these examples is from the video game *World Perfect Heroes*. This is a street-fighter game with an obviously stereotypically gay (his main pose being reminiscent of Marilyn Monroe) character named Rasputin. For his "super move" he disrobes and pulls the opponent behind bushes to rape them, and if you time it just right, you can pull them back in for a second round. This is not only extremely misrepresenting the LBGTQ+ community, but also unintentionally enforcing the idea that people on the spectrum of sexuality other than straight are mentally-ill and are purely sexual beings. The sexuality of lesbians is also treated completely different than gay characters. In *Mass Effect 2*, female "shepards" were allowed to fornicate while male to male relationships were not. The whole argument comes full circle when you include a game like the *Sims*. In its United States release, male homosexual couples were not an option, proving that the gaming community only wanted to view gay characters as villains, not as perfectly healthy and happy couples. This type of discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community can also be observed in the vernacular used by the gaming community.

In today's society, even with commercials and posters explaining why hate-speech is always a negative thing, words like gay, fag, and faggot are still common place holders for every day exclamation and frustration. Being in a traditionally conservative thinking fraternity (along with Brandon), I can verify that these words are still being used by your average gamer. So to tally it all up so far, gaymers not only have to deal with underrepresentation, misrepresentation, and outright homophobia from other players, but also "implied disparagement which downplays, obfuscates or otherwise ignores the effect of hate-speech within the larger heteronormative gaming community" (6). Even though these words are used not to be pointed at the community itself, but rather to show disappointment or a way to insult other players, the fact that they are using these terms as negatives and they are validating the use of these words for actually homophobic players is problematic.

There is also a slight discrimination in the way people choose to name their avatars in these virtual worlds. Most gamers that play across the board when it comes to different consoles use the same name for all of their accounts, this allows them to almost brand this identity as their own (Kelley 194). Therefore, when coming up with a new identity, there is a lot of thought that goes into it. The companies all tend to have policies that do not allow the use of names "that incorporate vulgar language or which are otherwise offensive, defamatory, obscene, hateful, or racially, ethnically or otherwise objectionable." The most commonly filtered words are queer, gay, and fag, but the words dyke, lesbian, and homosexual are usually not filtered (193). This allows some room for homophobic players to have discriminatory names, as well as the tactic of purposefully misspelling words that are filtered. Some examples of these misspellings are "phag" and "ghey." Fortunately, there is usually a function to alert the gaming company of the offensive language being used, but because of the heteronormative culture of the gaming community we cannot be certain that it always gets reported.

A larger factor that affects the way minorities are treated in the gaming community is the idea of the "boy's club." When video games were first invented, it was mainly well-educated men creating them because coding was still a new concept. Now because of how readily available technology is, people have started learning to code earlier and millennial men have taken over the industry and the diversity of the makers of these video games do not reflect the diversity of the people who play their games. While there are other factors (economic, social, etc.) that also influence who has the access to the technology required to code video games, the fact that there are not many LGBTQ+ video game coders influences how many LGBTQ storylines and characters there are in video games.

With a combination of the humiliating and demeaning speech of women, along with the almost complete alienation of anyone not heterosexual and white in the gaming community, it is obvious that the book *Ready Player One* accurately depicts the heteronormativity of the online world. Cline includes a member of the LGBTQ+ community, but we do not learn of this characters sexuality until the very end and it has no effect whatsoever on the plotline of the story. When game coders include members of the LGBTQ+ community, they are often stereotyped versions of their sexuality and are psychotic villains. While this may diversify the character list away from all white male, it does not represent the actual people in a positive or accurate way. So the question to ask is, why do we continue to allow the belittling and stereotyping of the LGBTQ+ community in the things we enjoy every day? Unfortunately, this is a question no one has the answer to and it would be almost impossible for the small community of gaymers to make any difference in the video game world currently. We have seen that there are diverse characters in the gaming world due to a push from LGBTQ+ gamers, but even though the book and games do include characters that are members of the LGBTQ+ community, they are not inclusive due to the horrific stereotypes

portrayed and the unintentional or intentional homophobia and heteronormativity of the online

world.

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