

Avatar, the Last Player

by Alex Johnson

Nearly everyone in society goes through some sort of struggle. These struggles vary from person to person. While everyone may have a struggle in their life, people of color and homosexuals tend to face some of the toughest struggles throughout their lives. People of color and homosexuals often wish to be a heterosexual white person in order to make their lives easier and mitigate most of their life struggles. In Ernest Cline's novel *Ready Player One* many people who have created avatars in the world famous game OASIS often make their characters to be versions of themselves that they cannot be in real life. Nearly every character in *Ready Player One* succumbs to making their avatars everything they wish they could be in the real world.

In *Ready Player One* most of the people live their lives through the OASIS, with currency within OASIS being almost, if not just as, valuable as currency outside the game. In addition, most people have jobs that take place in the OASIS. Quintessential jobs such as a teacher are all done in the OASIS as well. While many jobs are present in the OASIS, there are still jobs in the real world that people have. The OASIS in this novel is basically required for many people's survival because the world outside the game is worse. The world that *Ready Player One* takes place in suffers from food shortages and poverty. Most people live an impoverished life and struggle to make it through the day.

Wade Watts is the main character in the novel and faced issues when he attended school in the real world with being overweight and having acne, normal issues

for any teenager in school. When Wade created his avatar for the OASIS he made sure that his avatar looked similar to him, except slimmer, and with no acne issues.

Something of importance to note is that Wade is one of the few Caucasian main characters in this novel. Wade's issues in life stem from normal pubescent issues and his social class. Wade lives in "the stacks", which is basically *Ready Player One's* version of The Projects. Wade lives in a trailer with his aunt, who hates him, and about fifteen other people, despite this, in the OASIS he manages to be someone who appears to be a well-off person.

In Marxist Theory, there is basically a war between the classes where most people have little to nothing, and few people are "well-to-do" or are extremely wealthy. This classism is one of the driving factors in this novel because many of the Gunters are searching for Halliday's Easter Egg because they want his fortune for themselves and because they want to prevent IOI from finding it and making people pay to play the OASIS. While classism plays a major role in the novel, and the decisions made by every character, African-American Theory plays one of the largest roles in the novel, because nearly every main character plays a white avatar despite being another race in real life.

Projections of whiteness are everywhere in society and are extremely important to how a child learns to accept their skin color. These projections are in most works of literature that are taught to nearly everyone that attends high school in America. In *Exposing the White Avatar: Projections, Justifications, and the Ever-Evolving American Racism* the authors explain, "Classic American books like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe (1852) and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain (1885) cast black characters as dim-witted, while positioning whites as superior and/or savior-

like” (Nishi). The fact that in these novels teens are taught certain stigmas of people of color, specifically blacks in this case, only serves to engrain these ideals into the teens. This idea of projections of whiteness are not only seen in literature, but are also prevalent in films. With the idea of certain dialects being assigned to people based on the color of their skin. Furthermore, African American actors and actresses are typically given minor roles or more “black” roles in films. This causes people to have an extremely specific idea of how African Americans act and should be portrayed.

Understanding how people are exposed to these “projections of whiteness” is vital when it comes to understanding how characters in *Ready Player One* choose what their avatars look like. Since the novel is set in the future (2044) in a world that is extremely similar to the world we live in, one can safely assume that the schools’ curriculum is similar to ours as well. This means that nearly everyone in *Ready Player One* has been exposed to the same “projections of whiteness” that we are exposed to today. Due to the fact that “we define the avatar as any self-representation online” it can be implied that an avatar is partially a person’s true self and alternate self. Aech and her mother both chose to make white male avatars largely because it would be easier for a white male to get a job than for a black female to get a job. However, their decision to make white avatars shows that they do not accept their own skin color because they feel that they would not be able to make a living in the world as anything other than a white person. One can see this more in Aech because of how she lives in the world. Aech lives in a van with no windows and only leaves the van in order to buy gas and when she has to leave the van she feels insecure about the way she looks.

Similar to Aech, Art3mis faces insecurity in the real world, however, unlike Aech, Art3mis is white in the real world. Art3mis made her avatar to be a white female, just as she is. Despite this Art3mis still faces similar issues that Aech does when it comes to being a female in the OASIS. In today's world, many people see video games as a place for men and not women, this is unfortunately still true in *Ready Player One* despite the fact that nearly everyone uses the OASIS. This can be seen when looking at Art3mis. Art3mis is a female player who is constantly at the top of the leaderboards in the game when it comes to the hunt for Halliday's Easter Egg. Wade goes into great detail about how Art3mis looks, and it is important to note that unlike other female avatars Art3mis is not the typical female avatar, and she is more masculine than most females in the game.

While Art3mis is a successful female player in the OASIS, she is only successful because of the fact that her avatar does not fit the "norm" of female avatars in the game. In addition, throughout the novel she succumbs to othering by people. She is often seen as an exotic female because she had refused to conform to the social norms. This is commonly referred to as exotic othering. Wade is one of the main people that end up showing exotic othering towards Art3mis by constantly sexualizing her avatar and "falling in love" with her without knowing the *real* Art3mis. He doesn't just sexualize her avatar, he also ends up sexualizing Art3mis in real life when he sees a picture of her for the first, he notes a birth mark on her face that causes her face to have two different skin tones, and says that he thinks he makes her look even more attractive (Cline 292).

In research conducted by Dunn and Guadagno (2012) they found that people with lower self-esteem often tend to choose darker skin color when creating their in-

game avatars. They also found that people with higher self-esteem tend to make lighter skinned avatars. This is important because it shows that a person's self-image has a major impact on the skin tone of their avatar. Skin tone is one of the first things people notice about someone, in real life and in a video game.

The idea of someone creating an avatar with lighter skin because they have self-esteem is not seen in *Ready Player One*, however, we do see a character creating an avatar with lighter skin in order to boost their self-esteem. This is seen in Aech the most. Since Aech is African American and lives in a world where not being white is frowned upon, it would be safe to assume that she has a low self-esteem. Despite this, she had created a white avatar. While this may contradict Dunn and Guadango's research, it also shows that people with lower self-esteem tend to make lighter skinned avatars in order to boost their own self esteem. Aech in the OASIS has a higher self-esteem and self-image, than she does outside of the game. Aech's avatar helped Aech to improve her self-esteem throughout the course of the novel and her experiences with Wade, Art3mis, Dato and Shoto.

Furthermore, in research conducted by Yee and Bailenson (2007) they found, "Not only does the creator dictate the identity behaviors of the avatars, but [Yee and Bailenson] have found that avatars have an impact on the creators' behaviors." This shows us that a player's avatar has an actual impact on how the creator of the avatar acts. This could range from picking up on small mannerisms that only the avatar does to presenting themselves as their avatar does in the game. No matter how small or how large the impact, the fact remains that a player's avatar has the ability to impact the creator's behavior outside of the game.

. This is important because throughout the novel characters tend to act similar to their avatars outside of the game and some tend to act like the complete opposite. Art3mis happens to be one of those people that act completely different to her avatar. Throughout the novel Art3mis is seen as a boyish female and not at all helpless and in need of a man in her life. However, this changes at the end of the novel after Wade finds the Easter Egg and logs out of the OASIS. He goes looking for Art3mis and Og tells him, "Og grinned at me, then pointed. 'Up those stairs and out the first door you see,' he said. 'She said she'd wait for you at the center of my hedge maze.'" (Cline 369). This move by Art3mis is completely different from how she had been acting throughout the entire novel because now that Wade had found the Easter Egg, she uses herself almost as a prize for Wade. Which shows that despite everything she still is used to the societal norms of "typical" female gender roles.

On the other hand, we have Wade, or Parzival, who can be described as a rather shy and timid person in the real world at the beginning of the novel. This can be seen through the fact that he chose to enroll in school in the OASIS and dropout of school in the real world. We see these traits again when he moves into his new apartment and does not leave the apartment until he is forced to, because the IOI corporate police arrested him and forced him to leave his apartment. That said, Parzival on the other hand is not nearly that shy nor timid, because the novel takes place primarily in the OASIS the reader can see instances of Parzival's traits more than Wade's. After he meets Art3mis for the first time he constantly sends her messages until she finally responds to tell him to stop. While it is not directly said, it can be implied that this is something that Wade Watts would have never done in the real world.

While it may seem that Parzival has had no impact on Wade Watts at first glance, it is important to note his plan to find the final gate and how to open it in order to finally find Halliday's Easter Egg. In order to find the final gate and get to it, Wade had to do something that anyone would find to be completely insane, he had to get arrested by the IOI corporate police and forced into Indentured Servitude. No one who was forced into Indentured Servitude ever got out, and only people who could not afford a place to stay chose to live in Indentured Servitude because of the fact that no one ever got out. Wade, being influenced by Parzival, opted to get arrested so that he could find out what was behind the barrier set up by the Sixers and how to get through it. Going through with this plan took tremendous amounts of courage that Wade would most likely not have had if it were not for his avatar, Parzival, having.

Overall, despite a character's ethnicity and gender, they are all forced to make their avatars the best versions of themselves according to society. This is largely due to the fact that the school systems indirectly force people to feel that lighter skin is more attractive than darker skin. Also, they put people in the mindset that in order to succeed in life you need to be a man or marry a successful man if you're a woman. These two mindsets forced the characters in *Ready Player One* to make avatars that were images of what they wished they could be, but knew they never could be.

Everyone in the novel *Ready Player One* by Ernest Cline had been pressured to make white male avatars in order to be seen as equal by everyone else in the OASIS. These characters feel pressured not only because of the setting of the novel, but also because of the fact that the author has been exposed to these "norms" and incorporated them into his novel, either consciously or subconsciously. Cline's novel character's use

the OASIS as a way to conform to what society wants them to be, despite them never being able to conform in the real world. They also strive to be infallible individuals in the game by attempting to cover up all their real world flaws that society, and that they, do like. *Ready Player One* can serve as a way for us to see the flaws in our society and how we pressure our youth to attempt to reach these impossible standards.

Works Cited

- Cline, Ernest. *Ready Player One*. Dark All Day, Inc., 2011.
- Dunn, R. A., & Guadango, R. E. My avatar and me – Gender and personality predictors of avatar self-discrepancy. *Computer in Human Behavior*, 28(1), 97-10.
- King, Daniel L., and Paul H. Delfabbro. "The Cognitive Psychology Of Internet Gaming Disorder." *Clinical Psychology Review* 34.4 (2014): 298-308. Academic Search Complete. Web. 1 Dec. 2016.
- Li, Dong Dong, Albert Kien Liau, and Angeline Khoo. "Player–Avatar Identification In Video Gaming: Concept And Measurement." *Computers In Human Behavior* 29.1 (2013): 257-263. Academic Search Complete. Web. 1 Dec. 2016.
- Nishi, Naomi W., Cheryl E. Matias, and Roberto Montoya. "Exposing The White Avatar: Projections, Justifications, And The Ever-Evolving American Racism." *Social Identities* 21.5 (2015): 459-473. Academic Search Complete. Web. 1 Dec. 2016.
- Stowe, H. B. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Boston, MA: John P. Jewett., 1852.
- Twain, M. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. New York, NY: Webster, 1885.
- Yee, N., & Bailenson, J. (2007). The Proteus effect: The effect of transformed self-representation on behavior. *Human Communication Research*, 33(3), 271-290.