Wade's World:
Wade, Aech, and Friendship in *Ready Player One*

by Amberlee Seitz

The use of the internet is quickly becoming normalized in the western world. The

internet is used for almost everything: checking the weather or the traffic, listening to music,

performing financial transactions, looking for jobs, and shopping. Not only is internet use

becoming normalized, but society is increasingly becoming dependent on it. Besides easy access

to information, why are people drawn to the internet and online world? Are there any benefits

or, as many believe, is spending so much time online ruining face-to-face social interaction? The

use of the internet requires an online identity, which brings into question the validity of these

identities. Do the avatars people use accurately portray who they are and if not, why do they

make that choice? These questions are just as valid today as they are in the setting of the novel,

and I will focus on two of the main characters of the book, Wade and Aech, in an attempt to

answer those questions.

Ready Player One is a novel that is set in the not too distant future, in the year

2045. The world is in ruin; fossil fuels are running out and society is on the verge of collapsing.

In this future, all commerce takes place online, so even the economy has become dependent upon

the online world. Nearly everyone spends all of their time in the OASIS - the Ontologically

Anthropocentric Sensory Immersive Simulation, a virtual reality simulator that has replaced the

internet - including Wade, the main character of the novel. The OASIS, hosting thousands of

different planets, has become a utopian refuge, a place where you can be anyone you want.

Billionaire James Halliday, the creator of OASIS, has passed away and he left a video which

revealed that he has hidden an "Easter egg" somewhere in the OASIS – to get to the egg, a player

must first find three keys that open three gates. Whomever makes it that far and finds the egg wins Halliday's entire fortune, over two hundred and forty billion dollars, and gains the majority stake in his company, Gregarious Simulation Systems; in other words, the winner will become the king of the (online) world.

In the novel, Wade is an orphan, living with an uncaring aunt, in a place called "the stacks" - trailers that are stacked on top of each other and held together by metal beams, which were constructed in order to save space, energy, and resources. These "stacks" have become a dangerous place and theft and murder are not at all uncommon, leading Wade to spend his time away from home unless absolutely necessary. After five years of everyone searching in vain for the keys many people have lost interest. When Wade ends up finding the first one, this renews interest in the egg hunt. Now the race is on between the "sixers," employees of the Innovative Online Industries (or IOI), who want to win so they can begin to charge people for logging onto the OASIS, and the "high five," the top five "gunters" (serious Easter egg hunters) on the scoreboard. As the hunt progresses, it becomes a matter of life or death, as the IOI demonstrate that they will do whatever it takes to win.

The main characters in the novel are the "high five", the top five members on the Easter egg hunt scoreboard: Wade aka Parzival; Samantha aka Art3mis; Helen aka Aech; Toshiro Yoshiaki aka Daito; and Akihide Karatsu aka Shoto. Throughout much of the novel, they did not know each other's real names, and they never considered meeting in person. All of their interactions took place online, which was not at all unusual. In the world of *Ready Player One*, there is almost no interaction between people offline. Wade and Aech were best friends, even though they had never physically met. They frequently met in Aech's virtual chatroom, called

the Basement, to play games, watch movies, talk, and just hang out, much as people do today, offline.

Many of the current fears regarding the fate of the world are mirrored in the novel. Wade's world is in ruin mainly by the overuse of fossil fuels. The high consumption of energy used most of the fuel up, so they had to begin conserving what was left. In the novel, this is called the "Global Energy Crisis" and if that sounds familiar, it is because we are in the midst of one of our own (Coyle 1). In *Ready Player One*, this has led to global warming and ill effects on the environment. Resources are running out, so many people are homeless and hungry. Civilization is in a decline and perhaps even collapsing (Cline 17). The nature of the world around them has led to the desire to withdraw from the real world and find refuge in the OASIS.

This refuge ends up being the only thing Wade has to look forward to. His father died when he was very young, and his mother died when he was eleven years old, due to a problems with drugs. He was forced to live with his aunt, who only saw him as a way to get more food from the government. There were 14 other people living in the trailer with his aunt so privacy was nonexistent. Wade had to constantly keep his eye on his belongings, or else his aunt would take them in order to sell them. Due to the less than ideal living conditions, Wade frequently spent time in his hideout, which was inside a van in the middle of a junkyard. This was where Wade entered the utopia called the OASIS.

Inside the OASIS, Wade is known as Parzival, except for when he is attending school, where he is known as Wade3. In real life, Wade is overweight, shy, and awkward, lacking self-esteem and possessing poor social skills, which he fully realizes is due to spending so much time inside the OASIS (Cline 30). When he was online, he had no problem making friends, or talking to people – it was only when he was offline that he had problems, among them not knowing what

to say or how to act, or breaking out in a cold sweat and failure to form complete sentences; all of which also happen to be manifestations of Social Anxiety Disorder or an extreme form of shyness (Schneier 1029-30).

In the future depicted in the novel, in another parallel to now, the public-school system was severely underfunded and overcrowded, and in Wade's own words, "school had been a Darwinian exercise. A daily gauntlet of ridicule, abuse, and isolation" (Leachman, Michael, And Chris Mai; Lewis, Laurie et al.; Cline 31). Fortunately for Wade, when he was in the sixth grade, he found out that he was eligible for the new OASIS public school system. This new online school experience was very beneficial to Wade. He created his own avatar to look like a "better" version of himself - no one knew what he really looked like – and people did not pick on him. The OASIS was the only place he felt safe.

It is not surprising in contemporary times for people who are lonely or shy to seek refuge online. According to Michael Chan, "Shy individuals are more likely to use the Internet to compensate for their perceived deficit of real life social interactions and to alleviate feelings of loneliness and depression" (84). This is due to the fact that online relationships are based on people having things in common, and many people are more comfortable revealing their "true selves" online, as these relationships are based on commonalities, rather than physical looks. Research indicates that "relationships will develop closeness and intimacy significantly faster over the internet" due to these elements (Sheeks and Birchmeier 65). This is evident in the novel, especially between Wade and Aech.

Although there is a competitive edge to Wade and Aech's relationship due to their hunt for Halliday's egg, this hunt is what initially brought them together. In the novel Wade explains that they hit it off because they shared the same interests, which was in truth only one interest –

"a total, all-consuming obsession with Halliday and his Easter egg" (Cline 38). Wade

acknowledges that he knows almost nothing about Aech in the real world, but because Aech

spent all of his waking hours in the OASIS, just like he did, Wade assumed that he was just as

lonely and isolated as he was (Cline 39).

Another parallel to today's world is the gulf between students with money, and those

without. Although basic OASIS headsets are free for students, and there was only a twenty-five-

cent fee to use and operate the system, unless you possessed OASIS credits, allowing you to

purchase travel vouchers or your own personal transportation, you were stuck on the planet

where your school was located. This was very limiting for Wade, as he lacked his own personal

funds. The main way to earn money was competing in events against other players in the

OASIS, but unfortunately, these events only occurred on other planets, meaning Wade could not

compete in them. Aech, on the other hand, was one of the highest-ranking combatants in the

OASIS, meaning he was quite wealthy. Even so, Aech never made fun of Wade for not being

able to afford to travel. He never held his wealth over Wade's head, never insulted him by

offering to let him borrow credits, and Wade would never ask to borrow them, as they had too

much respect for each other. This level of respect and friendship is often difficult to find in the

offline world, yet these two have managed to forge this level of friendship in a virtual world; I do

not believe their friendship is any less "real" because of that. As stated earlier, many people feel

safe sharing their "true selves" when making friends online, so to my way of thinking, this can

create a stronger bond of friendship than ones created offline, where many people pretend to be

someone they are not.

Late in the novel it is revealed that Aech, portrayed as a white male in the OASIS, is a

girl in the real world; not only is she a girl, but she is a homosexual African-American. Wade is,

of course, stunned at first, wondering how Aech could possibly have deceived him for all of these years, after everything they have been through, and everything they have shared about themselves. Eventually he determines that it doesn't matter, as she is his best friend. As they went through the motions of getting to know each other he says:

> I realized that we already *did* know each other, as well as any two
>
> people could. We'd known each other for years, in the most
>
> intimate way possible. We'd connected on a purely mental level. I
>
> understood her, trusted her, and loved her as a dear friend. None
>
> of that had changed, or could be changed by anything as
>
> inconsequential as her gender, or skin color, or sexual orientation.
>
> (321)

 This meant a lot to Aech, as her own mother kicked her out of the house when she was 18, after Aech disclosed that she was gay and had been dating a girl online for over a year.

What made Aech decide to portray herself online as something other than what she was in the real world? The OASIS is a place where you can be anything you want, and those choices aren't limited to human forms, yet she chose to be a straight while male. According to Aech, she chose to use a white male avatar because her mother had determined that using that avatar afforded a marked difference in how a person was treated, as well as the opportunities they were given. Her mother worked online and found that using a white male avatar was far more advantageous in her line of work. Aech's mother even went so far as to register her for school in the OASIS as a white male, rather than an African-American female.

Reading about this apparent need for African Americans to portray themselves as white even this far into the future saddened me. In today's society, we are still dealing with issues regarding race and gender; it would be nice to read about a future where these issues have been resolved, or at least one where progress has been made. Aech's mother's response, as well as Aech's own response, to this racism was to portray themselves as a white male, which is an indication of internalized racism. According to Lois Tyson, internalized racism is "the acceptance of the belief pressed upon them by racist America that they are inferior to whites, less worthy, less capable, less intelligent, or less attractive" (Tyson 212). I have also found research that indicates that many adolescents who are attempting to develop their own identities may "choose to use avatars that possess characteristics and qualities they would like to possess themselves" perhaps as a way to compensate for something they lack in real life (Trepte and Reinecke 172). They also found that players with low levels of psychological well-being created avatars with the more favorable personality traits they possessed in real life.

These are interesting findings to me, as it appears that players may create avatars either as completely different versions of themselves, created as, perhaps, they wished they were (as Aech did), or create them with traits they already possess, just sort of tweaked (as Wade did), depending on their psychological well-being. Of course, Trempte and Reinecke also found that sometimes avatars that are vastly different from the individual in real life may be chosen simply because it is more advantageous in order to succeed in the game, with no bearing on personality traits or physical characteristics they wished they possessed in real life. Either one of these options may be the case for Aech, but when the weight of what her mother taught her regarding identity is factored in, as well as the fact that physical strength and/or agility don't factor into the

hunt for the Easter Egg, I believe that she created her avatar in order to compensate for what she lacked in real life – to be secure in the knowledge that she would be treated fairly.

Ready Player One ends as most adolescent, and many adult, literature does, with good triumphing over evil, and a happily ever after ending. In the novel, Wade sees the error in spending all of his waking moments in the OASIS, and vows to spend his new-found earnings on trying to improve the real world he lives in. It doesn't appear to rightfully acknowledge the issue regarding the value of friendships formed online, especially after spending so much time describing the special bonds that can be formed, particularly the special friendship Wade shares with Aech, but also the bonds between them and the rest of the "high five."

Ready Player One appears to imply that technology will ruin the world; the future in that world is in the state it is in because of people spending too much time in the online world, when they should have been spending their time focused on the world falling apart around them. People, such as Wade, have lost the ability to interact with the world face to face, preferring to spend their time with people virtually. While for some people, this may be true, I have also found research that indicates the online world can be beneficial to people who suffer from social anxiety, loneliness, and shyness, allowing them to form relationships they may not have been able to form in the real world.

I am not sure in which direction our own world is headed. We are dealing with our own energy crisis, an over populated and underfunded public school system, and we are beginning to feel the effects of climate change. The novel *Ready Player One* does takes things to an exceptionally far extreme in response to these issues – widespread famine, poverty, disease, and a world entering into extreme ruin. Everyone in that future has given up on the outside world, and has retreated to a virtual world. I believe that the future depicted in the novel is only one out

of many possible versions of the future, and was formed that way in the novel due to current fears regarding our own future and what it may hold. Older generations believe that technology is advancing for too quickly and worry about future generations. I think we can create a future that combines the virtual world with the offline world, without the world collapsing around us, all but forgotten. With the direction that technology is currently headed, an online world much like the OASIS is not very far outside the realm of possibility, but I believe that we can find a favorable balance between the two.

Works Cited

Chan, Michael. "Shyness, Sociability, and the Role of Media Synchronicity in the Use of

    Computer-mediated Communication for Interpersonal Communication." *Asian Journal*

    of Social Psychology, vol. 14, no. 1, 2011, 84-90.

Cline, Ernest. *Ready Player One*. New York, Crown Publishers, 2011.

Coyle, Eugene D., and Richard A. Simmons, editors. *Understanding the Global Energy Crisis*.

    Purdue University Press, 2014.

Leachman, Michael, And Chris Mai. "Most States Still Funding Schools Less Than Before the

    Recession." *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*, 16 Sept. 2014,

    www.cbpp.org/research/most-states-still-funding-schools-less-than-before-the-recession.

    Accessed 10 Dec. 2016

Lewis, Laurie et al. "Condition of America's Public School Facilities: 1999." *Condition of*

    America's Public School Facilities: 1999, NCES, 21 June 2000,

    www.nces.ed.gov/surveys/frss/publications/2000032/index.asp?sectionid=8. Accessed

    16 Dec. 2016

Schneier, Franklin R. "Social anxiety disorder." *New England Journal of Medicine,* vol. 355, no.

    10, 2006, 1029-1036.

Sheeks, Miranda S., and Zachary P. Birchmeier. "Shyness, Sociability, And the Use of

    Computer-Mediated Communication in Relationship Development." *Cyberpsychology &*

    Behavior, vol. 10, no. 1, 2007, 64-70.

Trepte, Sabine, and Leonard Reinecke. "Avatar Creation and Video Game Enjoyment." *Journal of Media Psychology*, vol. 22, no. 4, 2010, 171–184.

Tyson, Lois. "Using Concepts from African American Theory to Understand Literature." *Using Critical Theory: How to Read and Write about Literature*, 2nd ed., Routledge, 2011, 206-244.