The OASIS of Oppression: Gaming Culture and Femininity in *Ready Player One*

by Brittany Walsh

In a virtual world, gamers and participants can do things they have never imagined doing or be individuals they have never imagined being. However, because video game society is a direct reflection of the society in which we live, oppressive ideologies and beliefs still exist and are enacted in various ways. To meet the demands and needs of gamer society, individual players may need to alter the way in which they behave, speak, and appear in the virtual world. In the novel *Ready Player One*, for instance, characters fall victim to the oppressive ideologies of gaming culture because of their sex, despite the utopian promises of the OASIS (Ontologically Anthropocentric Sensory Immersive Simulation).

Ready Player One by Ernest Cline is a science fiction novel set in the year 2044–a time with a significant energy crisis and global warming threat that causes extensive social and economic problems. Wade Watts, a seventeen year-old living in the slums with his distracted aunt, lives a quiet life until he becomes famous for his accomplishments in the OASIS, a virtual universe one accesses through haptic gloves and a visor. As a teenager, Wade attends school through the OASIS, but ultimately uses the virtual entity to search for an Easter Egg–a hidden prize of billions of dollars and control of the OASIS–embedded in the coding of the OASIS society. The creator of the OASIS, James Halliday, has created this hunt so the underdog could achieve greatness. Through extensive studies of 1980's popular culture and the assistance of OASIS friends Aech, Art3mis, Daito, and Shoto, Wade is able to find the multi-billion dollar Easter Egg and gain control of the OASIS.

Within the novel, the OASIS is virtual environment composed of millions of different online worlds and virtual locations. Similar to the popular Playstation, Xbox, and Nintendo systems of the real world, the OASIS provides users with the opportunity to explore worlds different from the one they are living in. However, when one fails to represent certain expectations of a "gunter"–a gamer who is searching for Halliday's Easter Egg–they are greeted with inhospitable reactions and unfavorable commentary. Similarly, in the United States today, gamers who do not meet the status quo are often harassed due to their sex. A close reading of the novel reveals how the gaming culture of the United States has influenced the gaming culture of the OASIS.

Gaming culture is a unique competitive, intense, and systematic entity. However, its origins reveal how gaming culture is negative and oppressive. During the time of technological innovation, the creators in the labs actually making the technology were white straight males. When video games were first developed, college-aged white men were spearheading the movement, according to the documentary *GTFO,* which examines gamer culture and its oppressive practices. Because of this, these men were creating video games that they would like to see– games that satisfied the expectations and ideologies of the white straight male. With this in mind, it is important to note such expectations of a society that caters to the needs of the male norm.

The literature theory of feminism can be used as a guide to understanding the gaming culture of the OASIS and how it negatively affects those who are different from the norm. To begin with, one can look at traditional gender roles and how they are portrayed in the novel. According to Lois Tyson, traditional gender roles "cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive; they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive" (Tyson 85). These gender roles can be seen through the stereotype of most gamers being male. Women are expected to partake in activities that benefit the home or the household, not participate in things such as

video games, according to patriarchal norms. This can be seen specifically in the novel in a conversation between Art3mis and Wade. Wade says: "most gunters are male, and they can't accept the idea that a woman has beaten and/or outsmarted them" (Cline 170). While the latter may be true, the former is not, as Drew Harwell observes: "The stereotype of a 'gamer'–mostly young, mostly nerdy, and most definitely male–has never been further from the truth. In the United States, twice as many adult women play video games as do boys" (Harwell). Although gaming culture says that most gamers are male, it is far from the truth and Wade's comment that most gunters are male perpetuates a stereotype that discourages women from identifying themselves as gunters or gamers.

The latter half of Wade's statement–"they (male gunters) can't accept the idea that a woman has beaten and/or outsmarted them"–has its foundations in biological essentialism. Biological essentialism is the "belief in the inborn inferiority of women...based on biological differences between the sexes" (Tyson 86). Because of what men have and women do not have, women are treated as inferior and expected to be less successful than men. In this instance, Wade alludes to the idea that male gunters cannot accept being on the same playing field as women because women are the weaker sex. In video game culture, competition between the sexes is rampant because men do not want to be seen as the weaker of the two. The documentary *GTFO* discusses the implications of gaming culture on women and this idea when one of the stars says:

> Being competitive is socialized as a masculine trait, and a lot of games are about being competitive. And if women and men are suddenly on an equal playing field because physicality's no longer a factor, if everyone's playing a fighting game together then theoretically, the only in battle is your brain.

This idea of everyone being on the same playing field and men not having a stronger chance of winning than a woman can make someone uncomfortable, the scholar continues. Because of this fear of being the weaker of the two, men in the gaming industry are lashing out as it becomes more diverse: "A lot of people are attracted to games because games allow us to control variables and interactions in a way that we can't in real life. And now that games culture is changing, people who found their sort of safe clubhouse in these male power fantasies fear having that taken from them" (Sun-Higginson, *GTFO*). Similarly, the males in the OASIS may feel threatened by Art3mis's presence, which is why they react they way that they do.

On a similar note, when Art3mis displays skills and traits typical of a highly evolved gunter, biological essentialism can be seen in the male reactions. For example, when Art3mis is able to speak on a significant amount of facts about the game *The Tempest,* Shoto says, "'Whoa…She's good'" and Aech replies, "'Damn, girl…You've got some serious knowledge" (Cline 351). Here, we see how when females display display a significant amount of knowledge about a stereotypical male activity, they are othered. Othering takes place when one does not meet the typical expectations of that individuals social group. For instance, the social group being female here and Art3mis having knowledge of the video game causes her to be othered.

When women do partake in video games and gaming culture, they are often sexualized and face sexual commentary. In the novel, Wade is a teenage boy with raging hormones; however, his sexualization of Art3mis's avatar represents what is oppressive about gaming culture. In video games, women are overtly sexualized in their avatar depictions of unreal expectations. Large breasts and small waists are the norm for female characters in video games, and in the OASIS, as Wade observes: "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). Here, the expectation is set that women have two different depictions and when one does not represent such an ideal, they are subaltern. With Art3mis meeting the expectations of a female avatar, her virtual body is praised. Additionally, some of Wade's remarks in the novel suggest that he sexualizes Art3mis's avatar. In one of the initial descriptions the audience receives of Art3mis, Wade says:

> She wore a suit of scaled gunmetal-blue armor that looked more sci-fi than fantasy. Twin blaster pistols were slung long on her hips in quickdraw holsters, and there was a long, curved elvish sword in a scabbard across her back. She wore fingerless *Road Warrior*-style racing gloves and a pair of classic Ray-Ban shades. Overall, she seemed to be going for a sort of mid-'80s postapocalyptic cyberpunk girl-next-door look. And it was working for me, in a big way. In a word: *hot* (Cline 87).

In the OASIS, Art3mis and her avatar are overly sexualized. In pervious accounts, the descriptions the audience receives of Wade are lackluster, but Art3mis's descriptions are quite extensive. This suggests an overt sexualization of women and their avatar in the OASIS, displaying how the OASIS is not the most positive of environments.

It is important to note the descriptions of Art3mis: they are purely physical descriptions and little is known about who she is as a person. In the blog *Bitch Lit,* the author discusses how Art3mis's character is objectified and represents a character to be looked at and toyed with:

> [Art3mis] is a higher level, has more extensive experience and celebrity than Wade. She should be powerful, independent, complex. Instead, Wade spends a lot of time talking about how beautiful her avatar is. A lot of time taking screen shots of her to look at again later. A lot of time trying to get her to date him, talk to him, or something.

With Art3mis, there is little character development. The audience knows little about her except her appearance in the OASIS and her accomplishments. Art3mis seems to be a placeholder for Wade; she gives him something to do and look at. In gaming culture, this is also what takes place, as women are objectified and looked at in a sexual manner, as Paul Tassi observes in "The One-Sided Problem of Oversexualization in Video Games":

> Outside of create-a-character titles like Saints Row, you're not going to find many heroes of either gender with a less than ideal body. The men are hulking with chiseled abs and broad shoulders. The women have flat stomachs and perfect breasts. These are the 'ideal forms' of each of these characters. Yet only one of them is ever viewed sexually to out siders, the women.

Female avatars are overtly sexualized by male video gamers in gameplay when they meet the expectations of a female gamer with the large breasts, or they are harassed and greeted with hostility when their avatars represent something different from the norm.

Art3mis and her avatar fall victim to the patriarchal and sexist ideologies of the time. In the piece *My Avatar, My Self,* Zach Waggoner says: "Our real-world identities are also modeled by social pressures and limitations: we live in a world not entirely of our own creation, bending to laws and ethical conventions that were discursively established long before we ever entered the conversation" (Waggoner 161). This suggests that Art3mis is conforming to the social pressures of how her body should look in the virtual world. Her body may not look like that in the real world, but with the OASIS, she is able to create her avatar to look any way she would like, even if she is influenced by social pressures.

In the OASIS, the representation of one's avatar is significant to how people treat and interact with a person. Oftentimes, in order to meet the expectations of a gamer, a woman may alter her avatar: "About 70% of female gamers said they played as male characters online, in hopes of sidestepping sexual harassment" (Harwell). Women who represent themselves differently online can be seen with Aech's avatar. Throughout the majority of the novel, Wade is under the impression that Aech is a male in the offline world, as his avatar is male. Aech's mannerisms and words reflect that of a masculine character, which assisted her in portraying herself in such a way.

Despite the utopian promises of the OASIS, Helen, Aech's real name, and her mother found that being a woman in the OASIS does not sit well with fellow gunters. In a conversation between Wade and Helen, Helen reports:

> In Marie's opinion, the OASIS was the best thing that had ever happened to both women and people of color. From the very start, Marie had used a white male avatar to conduct all of her online business, because of the marked difference it made in how she was treated and the opportunities she was given (Cline 320).

In the OASIS and in gaming culture, the norm of being a gamer is a white male, and Aech portrays herself in such a way to satisfy the cultural expectations of video gaming. When one's virtual identity does not conform to the societal standards of gaming, the individual has opportunities limited to them and receives harassment.

Wade is a product of the society in which he lives, which is why his commentary can be seen as oppressive. When Wade discovers that Aech is actually a woman in real life, he says: "I never imagined…That the famous Aech, renowned gunter and most feared and ruthless arena combatant in the entire OASIS, was in reality, a… young African American woman" (Cline

319). Even Wade cannot believe that Aech is actually a woman because of the virtual skills she has and abilities she has online. This is once again based on the belief in biological essentialism, the idea that women are innately inferior to men because of their different genitalia.

Unfortunately, when Aech does reveal her true identity to Wade, it is once again stripped away from her by Wade's actions. Wade admits: "Even though I now knew Aech was actually a female in real life, her avatar was still male, so I decided to continue to refer to him as such" (Cline 330). In order to satisfy the patriarchy of the OASIS, Wade continues to refer to Aech as a male despite her female identity. This suggests that Wade struggles with the idea of playing a video game with a woman because she does not meet the typical notions of being a gamer.

The OASIS was meant to be a place where people could have fun and explore different worlds with the cover of their true identity. Wade observes: "Anonymity was one of the major perks of the OASIS. Inside the simulation, no one knew who you really were, unless you wanted them to" (Cline 28). However, one when reveals who they truly are, they are met with hostilities, which are typical reflections of gaming culture in the United States. Gaming culture in the US is dangerous to the female community, as being a female and being online means one encounters oppression no matter how good the individual is at the game. Being a woman and being online means being other, because of the failure to meet the stereotypical "gamer" norm. When women online encounter harassment as did Art3mis, they are discourage from further participation in such activities. Gaming is meant to be inclusive for all people, but in reality, it is not. The OASIS was meant to be a place for all people, but similar to gaming culture, it is for men and men only.

Because of this, it is clear that the author, Ernest Cline, is reinforcing traditional patriar-chal notions through his characters and culture of the OASIS. Cline may have been influenced by the stereotypes of gaming culture in the United States, which is why his characters are a direct

reflection of such a culture. The novel falls short on representing a true *oasis,* and in larger culture, women who read such a novel may be discouraged from participating in video gaming and identifying themselves as gamers because of the patriarchal notions that this novel reinforces and promotes.

As one can see, the female characters of *Ready Player One* encounter hostilities in the online world of the OASIS, similar to that of the struggles of females involved in gaming culture. Despite the lack of blatant misogyny, there are still sexist ideals present in the novel that shape the way we think. Online identity plays a significant role in how one is treated online, and throughout the novel, Art3mis and Aech are both viewed differently once their true identities are reveals. The OASIS fails to fulfill its promise of being an *oasis,* a place where individuals can blossom and come into their own, when Art3mis is viewed as subaltern. The oppressive ideologies of patriarchy present in the OASIS discourage female players from displaying their true identities and ultimately suggest a culture that favors men over women. With novels such as *Ready Player One* that promote oppressive gaming culture and gaming stereotypes, we are less likely to see a positive change in the gaming industry that helps women advance in the culture.

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