

## **An Analysis of Wade:**

### **The Ambitions of Achieving Success Bring Individual Breakdown**

by Julia Wen

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*Ready Player One* by Ernest Cline is a novel about escape, rebellion, and resolution. The story is set in 2045, an era that according to the protagonist, Wade, is an ugly world. Wade is a teenager who indulges in the virtual world in search of a meaningful life that he fails to obtain in reality. He makes it at the end, yet, he had gone through a series of difficulties that force him to grow mature. The essay will focus on exploring the psychological factors that make him obsess with the OASIS and Wade's transformation in terms of self-recognition and goals.

Scholars Andrew K. Przybylski and Allison F. Mishkin had mentioned in their essay, "How the Quantity and Quality of Electronic Gaming Relates to Adolescents' Academic Engagement and Psychosocial Adjustment" that "electronic gaming, like most hobbies pursued during childhood, may be one of many activities that help young people develop and can be part of a healthy childhood if pursued in moderation" (Przybylski and Mishkin, 154). Unfortunately, Wade is absolutely indulges in the digital world with a desperate heart to live in the name of Parzival. Although he finally realized the importance of living in reality, he doesn't have the abilities to live in a society. He is lost after the searching.

The author, Ernest Cline, creates a sarcastic and lonely teenager who has nothing in

reality, but ultimately has everything. Wade narrates throughout the novel, thus he is the only voice that introduces the story to the readers. Wade's transformation is the most important part in the novel in terms of psychological aspects. The fact of being an orphan certainly influences Wade in many ways. For instance, Wade states in the beginning that he is "more or less raised by the OASIS's interactive educational programs" (Cline, 15). He is introduced to video games at an early age because of his mother's jobs. How does it feel when there's no one to talk to but the computer? Wade is not only lack of true physical interactions with people, but also mental relationships with others. Obviously, Wade shuts down all the connections with reality and unconsciously develops a new and better Wade inside the OASIS. Therefore, he obtains comforts and confidence with the identity of Parzival whenever he feels powerless in the real world. His hideout is actually inside the OASIS where he can be whoever he wants and do whatever he wants. The freedom that Wade feels can be seen as the empathy of Ernest Cline.

It is obvious that Ernest Cline illustrates a character that is identical to him regarding his interests, obsessions, and personality. Cline describes himself as a kid who loves to immerse in video games in his free time. He often daydreams about the adventures from the outside world. Both Cline and Wade are kids that long for the escape from reality which can bring them excitement and fulfillment in video games. It is interesting to draw similarities between the author and the characters. Cline is adopted by his grandparents, while Wade is adopted

by his aunt. The sense of struggling to become independent is overwhelming and both of them develop strong self-reliance.

Furthermore, they both have a close relationship with the elderly. For example, Wade's best friend in the real world that he considers as someone friendly to him is Mrs. Gilmore, "a sweet old lady in her mid-seventies" (Cline, 23). Cline had mentioned in an interview about the process of characterization,

I've found that if I imbue my characters with the same mix of same strengths, flaws, desires, and idiosyncrasies I encounter in myself and in other people in my life, they eventually reveal themselves and take on a life of their own. (qtd. in Bartel)

Wade is like a mirror that reflects the extreme part of Cline's psychological appearance. Through applying psychoanalytical theory, Cline sees the repression and insecurity in Wade. Wade is a kid who has low self-esteem and fears being abandoned. "I was jolted awake by the sound of gunfire in one of the neighboring stacks" (Cline, 13), this is the opening of chapter one. Wade loathes the reality that he lives in because it continuously reminds him fear and danger. Though he pretends to act cool, he is still a kid who shudders silently by himself in his sleeping bag. The terror haunts him so he merely ignores it and indulges in the "oasis".

On the other hand, interestingly, Cline meant to set Mr. Halliday's birthday on the day same as his own. They both were born in 1972. Though the story is narrated by Wade, I

actually feel that Cline is envisioning himself as Mr. Halliday, who has everything that one could ask for; plenty of money, a job that not only entertains others by oneself, and a lovely wife. Furthermore, the novel wouldn't even exist if there is no such person who founds and develops the OASIS. Mr. Halliday is clearly the controller and pioneer who set up the map for people to pursue treasures, and so is Cline. It is interesting to think of the fact that the story starts with Mr. Halliday's death because it suggests the possibility of going beyond the status quo. The egg hunt is the passage to reach the ultimate success.

Although he gets along well with Mrs. Gilmore, Wade is proved to be a teenager who has a lack of interactions with his peers. Therefore, he makes friends in the OASIS. According to Yust, "Heidi Campbell, a religious sociologist who studies US culture, describes the internet as a place where young people build a sense of 'home' through the acquisition of information" (Yust, 134). Wade has a really close friend in the OASIS, or should I say actually it's Parzival who has a really close friend in the OASIS that is Aech. They had never met each other in person, but they are the closest in terms of mental reliance.

The online world is just like another "home" to these teenagers. They feel powerful because of the freedom to be "somebody" in the virtual world, rather than to be a mega geek that no one cares whether they are alive or not in reality. According to Yust, Two scholars, Jennifer Jenson and Suzanne de Castell state that, "what young people associate with knowledge about their online friends is based on 'a kind of obsessive account keeping:

of friends, of favorites, of likes and dislikes, and of most clicked on kookiest, strangest, preetiest, ugliest, and so on people” (qtd. in Yust, 140). The virtual world follows the same rule as in reality which teenagers feel the sense of belonging. Meanwhile, making friends are a lot easier than in reality.

The online world provides privacy which is super valuable under the era of technological explosion. Yust had conducted a study in which one respondent responded that, “It’s easier to pretend you’re someone amazing than to face the reality that you have issues. It’s easier to make friends online who don’t know you than to go out in the real world and let everyone see who you really are” (Yust, 136). Through the application of psychoanalytical theory, I identify the situations of the avoidance and denial from reality. Wade is mentally extracted from his miserable and gloomy life from the moment that he pressed the “ENTER” button. Seeing the sign of “READY PLAYER ONE” pops on the screen is such an enormous relief to him. Wade obtains the opportunity to strive for being a “somebody” which he doesn’t have in the real world.

However, challenges are waiting ahead of him when he starts to compete in the egg hunt. Wade’s obsessions toward Mr. Halliday help him solve the riddles and defeat monsters, but also draw hostility from I.O.I, the evil company that wants to destroy the OASIS. According to Hodge, “Gaming storylines frequently adopt narratives of quest, apocalyptic threat, heroism and social action, which echo spiritual and religious concerns” (qtd. Yust,

139). In this case, *Ready Player One* fits perfectly into these assessments. The quest of finding Halliday's treasure is enhanced by the threats from the Sixers and I.O.I which trigger Wade's ambition and determination to win the competition. As soon as Wade feels obligated to win the competition, he is being controlled by the online society as one of the puppets. The desire of achieving success is so desperate that Wade restores the fear of intimacy whenever he is inside the "basement," Aech's chat room in the OASIS.

Psychoanalytical theory points out some dream symbols in literary works for which I spot some of them in *Ready Player One*. Firstly, the "basement" where Aech creates as a private chat room in order to invite other avatars is a perfect example. Basement symbolizes unconsciousness and or subconscious. Ideally, it serves as a place where avatars can exchange their knowledge about the egg hunt or just simply hang out with others. However, the "basement" is more than a visual place but a token of subconscious. Wade shares his personal information with Aech unconsciously because of the privacy that endows the power of feeling secure and stable. He subconsciously acts and speaks "real" inside the space because of the privacy that it provides.

Likewise, Wade has a "hideout" in reality that is a discarded van. The moment that he finds this perfect hideout, he knows right away that the van provides "immeasurable value: privacy" (Cline, 25). Wade feels the sense of safety and intimacy when he enters Aech's "basement" as well as the deserted van. Yust suggests that the situation of texting online

has become more and more common because of four reasons that were quicker, easier, more thoughtful, and more private. People are feeling more comfortable to text online when they don't feel at ease to talk in person. It proves that Wade is afraid of facing people in person and having eye contact while talking. Wade obtains the feeling of security that he doesn't have in the real world. This psychological transformation emphasizes Wade's limit as being a real person, and empowers the precious creation of his own, Parzival.

Secondly, headquarter of I.O.I is illustrated as an enormous and modern building that represents power and control. The relationship between I.O.I and avatars is similar with government and citizens. The Marxist theory suggests the concept of Classism separates people into different social statuses. Parzival is serves as the token of rebellion against I.O.I because he is considered as the hero to most of the OASIS players. According to Filewod, "We are all gamers in gamespace, on both sides of the screen. For me, this opens a way to think about the player as both actor and spectator distributed across a multiplicity of realms" (qtd. in Filewod). The idea of a player as both "actor and spectator" indicates the possibility that people will make up their avatars intentionally based on the advantages that they can receive. Wade is so desperate to prove his ability in OASIS. Therefore, he acts like a savior so that he can gain confidence as well as honor. However, when Mrs. Gilmore is killed in the fire that deliberately set off by I.O.I, Wade is "jacked up on adrenaline, unsure of what to do next, overcome by a paralyzing mixture of fear and rage" (Cline, 146), he suffers from emotional

breakdown that paralyzes his thinking.

The death of Mrs. Gilmore reminds Wade of his powerlessness and recklessness. “We feel terror, helplessness, or horror because of the extreme seriousness of what is happening and the failure of any way to protect against or reverse the harmful outcome” (qtd. in NCTSN), The National Child Traumatic Stress Network states in the section of Understanding Child Traumatic Stress about the psychological stress after children suffers from any kinds of trauma. Obviously and understandably, Wade is shocked by the fact that there is real matter of death which is triggered by the war in the virtual world. He feels angry towards the I.O.I and himself. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network also testifies that the children “may be especially "grossed out" or fascinated by grotesque injury or death and remain very focused on their own scars that serve as daily trauma reminders” (qtd. in NCTSN). Wade neither gives up his plan to revenge, nor soaks in remorse after he suffers from self-blaming. Mrs. Gilmore’s death is like a scar on his face that he could see whenever he looks into the mirror. Therefore, he is mentally exploded and never feels so determined in his lifetime when Daito turns out to be the second victim.

Daito’s death evokes Wade’s remorse over Mrs. Gilmore’s death. Wade suffers from the extreme pain because of the lost of two persons which leads to his own breakdown. Immediately, Wade searches for someone that he can talk to, which obviously is Aech. But sadly, he can only asks for comforts in the virtual world, while in reality, he can’t possibly



feels safe and sound by receiving embraces or any real connections with people. However, the motivations of competing in the egg hunt and surpassing the I.O.I had changed when he develops an intricate relationship with Art3mis. "I wanted to win the contest more than ever. Not just for the money. I wanted to prove myself to Art3mis. And I wanted the Hunt to be over, so that she would talk to me again" (Cline, 211). Ernest Cline deliberately inserts romantic elements in this novel which softens the tension of the war between avatars and I.O.I. Moreover, Cline illustrates the real situation of love in the OASIS which serves as a foreshadowing of one of the reasons that Wade is leaving the virtual world forever.

No one ever appears to be special to Wade, except Art3mis. The compulsion of wanting to draw near with Art3mis surpasses the original desire for money and fame. This transformation enhances the dominance of heroism. Wade's initial need of defeating the I.O.I is replaced by the instinct of pursuing Art3mis. The thirst of wanting to know Art3mis in person starts to wipe away his long-term reliance of being Parzival. According to Cronbach's,

Empathy with the game character was measured using the five items adapted from the study by Ritterfeld and Jin (2006) rated on a 5-point Likert scale: (1) "I developed good feelings for the character (avatar) I was role-playing"; (2) "I could relate to the character (avatar) I was role-playing"; (3) "I felt close to the character (avatar) I was role-playing"; (4) "I felt empathetic toward the character (avatar) I was role-playing"; and (5) "I could identify with the character (avatar) I was role-playing" (qtd. in Seung-A, 1178).

Wade fits into these assessments for which he identifies Parzival as another version of him inside the OASIS. Wade feels safe to be Parzival for years, yet he starts to realize the importance of being Wade in reality because of his quest over meeting Art3mis in person. “The sight of my tiny one-room apartment, my immersion rig, or my reflection in the mirror—they all served as a harsh reminder that the world I spent my days in was not, in fact, the real one” (Cline, 195). Wade does recognize the fact that no matter how successful he is in the OASIS, the glory does not shine on him, but on Parzival.

Filewod expresses the concerns regarding “living in the OASIS”, “Who am I when I project my senses in that world of digital code and pixels that comes alive in my brain as a vast and boundless world of possibility? How much choice do I have?” (qtd. in Filewod). Wade’s search throughout the competition is a seemingly free adventure. The difficulties that he has faced and the enlightenments that he has gained are the storyline that a society has prepared for individuals. Filewod mentions that, “Agency arises in gaming because games encode the possibility of disruption unconstrained by materiality, of playing “against” the game. If there’s only one road, you follow it, and games nudge players along scripted pathways” (qtd. in Filewod). After all, “we are still playing worlds defined by someone else”, Filewod concludes his essay by addressing the instance of dominance. Mr. Halliday creates the kingdom where he endows players the opportunities of reaching success. Ernest Cline makes up the plot which suggests individuals’ quest and searching. Wade is lost in his own

creation because he loses his own real identity.

Mr. Halliday's co-founder and best friend, Morrow, leaves the OASIS because it's "no longer in the videogame business" (Cline, 120). The OASIS turns out to be "a self-imposed prison for humanity" (Cline, 120). People indulge in video games so as to escape from reality. Wade is just an example of a speck within the galaxy that longs for recognition. No matter what drives him to compete in the egg hunt, Wade does not do it for himself but others. He feels good because of people's attention. He tastes the sweetness in success which does not repay in the real world. How is it possible that he can face the girl he likes when he does not have the confidence to face himself?

OASIS is "a pleasant place for the world to hide from its problem while human civilization slowly collapses, primarily due to neglect" (Cline, 120). OASIS does not open any chances for people to gain anything at all. Cunningly, Mr. Halliday reveals his true intention of creating OASIS near the end that is to remind people of the importance to live in the moment, and more importantly, in reality. No matter how "terrifying and painful as reality can be, it's also the only place where you can find true happiness. Because reality is real" (Cline, 364).

The story ends in a didactic way which does not surprise me. Wade has gone through multiple steps of transformation. He used to be a kid with low self-esteem in reality but overwhelmingly powerful as his own creation. Then he realizes the significance of living in

the real world after suffering from hardships. He finds his true love and abandons the perfect model of him, Parzival. OASIS is not the oasis for people to rest upon. Filewod mentions “gamespace as a neoliberal fantasy that promises infinitely renewable resources and equal opportunity for progression. But renewable and respawning resources lead to harvesting industries and exploitation” (qtd. in Filewod). At the moment that Wade creates Parzival, he loses self-recognition on pursuit of power over dominance and success. The online world is not only lacks of warmth in humanity, but deprives individuals’ rights of pursuing a better self.

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