

The Bittersweet Escape

by Bayleigh Williams

A new show recently came out on Netflix called *Stranger Things*. The eight-episode season follows the life of a boy named Mike and his friends in the 1980s. Mike and his friends are always playing Dungeons and Dragons in his basement, creating an entirely new world for themselves. It is their escape. Meanwhile, there is another world, much like the world the boys created. In this world, there are flesh-eating monsters and children with telekinesis. Unfortunately, one of Mike's friends is captured by one of those other-worldly monsters. During this point, Mike and his friends begin to reminisce over old times, when their missing friend was there. Through virtual reality and the past, this TV show represents a phenomenon so prevalent in American society: escapism.

Another fictional piece that exemplifies this phenomenon is Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One*. The 2011 dystopian novel takes place in the year 2045, following an 18-year-old boy named Wade. Like many dystopian novels, the real world is not a good place. The sky is polluted, food is scarce, and people's homes are crumbling. Wade lives with his aunt in a place called "The Stacks," a trailer park with stacked trailers to almost 20 trailers high or more, all held together by shaky scaffolding. This environment, mixed with his verbally and physically abusive aunt, is what causes Wade to escape his reality through a virtual reality headset called the "OASIS." OASIS stands for Ontologically Anthropocentric Sensory Immersive Simulation. The OASIS is where Wade goes to school, it's where he hangs out, and it's where he plays games. People can be anyone that they want to be and they don't have to be judged. They can have a

clean slate. There also happens to be a hidden prize within the OASIS made by the creator, James Halliday. Otherwise known as an Easter egg, this hidden prize has three gates to unlock, culminating in one person obtaining all of Halliday's riches, control over the OASIS, and his position in the business. Now, people in the OASIS are escaping within their escape by researching Halliday's game, movie, and book references in order to find the Easter egg.

Wade describes the real world in a rather bleak light, where people "no longer have enough energy to keep [their] civilization running like it was before," where "plants and animals are dying off in record numbers, and lots of people are starving and homeless" (Cline, 17). He is characterizing the present by comparing it with the 'Good Ol' Days,' or rather escaping through nostalgia. Escapism is a term that describes "the tendency to seek, or the practice of seeking, distraction from what normally has to be endured" (OED). Wade's escape is a coping mechanism he uses to combat the harsh reality surrounding him. Another word for coping mechanism is defense mechanism. In Lois Tyson's book, *Using Critical Theory*, Tyson explains four different defense mechanisms—avoidance, denial, displacement, and projection (Tyson, 84). Avoidance is like another word for escapism, because it involves the person distracting themselves from the issue in front of them. They are aware that there is an issue, yet they still don't want to think about it or be around it. This stems from several possible core issues—low self-esteem, insecure or unstable sense of self, fear of abandonment, fear of intimacy, and oedipal complex (Tyson, 84-5). In Wade's case, his core issues are his insecure or unstable sense of self and his fear of abandonment. It is clear that he has an insecure or unstable sense of self, because he lives a completely different life in the OASIS. His character, Parzival, may not have fancy clothes, but he is well-known for knowing his 80s references. More than knowing his 80s

references, he is consumed by them until he no longer has anything else to occupy his mind. He is learning more about Halliday than about himself. Later, his fear of abandonment is seen when he gets attached to another gamer named Art3mis. Even though she could be anybody in the real world, he falls in love with her character. When looking at Wade's home life, it makes sense that he could become attached so easily. His parents died when he was very young and his aunt couldn't care less about him. These aspects of Wade's life have caused him to have a fear of abandonment. In other words, he is afraid of losing people.

Instead of dealing with his core issues, Wade escapes into his own personal utopia of the OASIS. The OASIS is another type of Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Game (MMORPG), meaning that it is an online interactive game that allows real people to come together and be different characters within the game. Wade's escape into the OASIS can be characterized by a specific type of escapism called, "MMORPG escapism," which is "a particular case of avoidant coping, which is aimed at dealing with the stressor by escaping the threat or related emotions ("MMORPG"). Of course, Wade isn't the only person using MMORPG escapism. Aside from every day citizens using the OASIS, there is also a corporation called "IOI" that wants to take over the OASIS and force people to pay to play. After Wade passes the first gate, IOI agents try to make a deal with him for part of the overall prize. However, Wade refuses to make the deal and because of that, IOI blow up his home, destroying all of his neighbors. Thankfully, Wade has enough money from completing the first gate that he can afford a train ride to his new home in Columbus, Ohio. Then, when Wade gets on the train, he notices that "most of the passengers put on their visors the moment they sat down" (Cline, 163). Nobody even wants to deal with anyone else. Later, Wade comes out into the city and

realizes the tragedy the OASIS has caused. There are people “wait[ing] in line at the free solar charging stations, wearing bulky, outdated visors and haptic gloves” (Cline, 276). Clearly, everyone is so absorbed in virtual reality that they can’t deal with or handle the people around them. They are escaping the world through an MMORPG.

Further, there is another tool used to escape reality: memory. Wade is so committed to win Halliday’s Easter egg that he becomes consumed with 80s references and can correctly recite facts and quotes from popular entertainment and play almost any 80s game console. This is because the reality of the past changes into a memory. According to Kilbourn, “memory’s meaning is so rooted in visual technologies, that cinema and photography are ‘constitutive of memory in its deepest and most meaningful sense” (Kirkland, 321). This means that people remember things through a visual filter. A lasting image of a memory is flat and doesn’t give the full five senses of the time, allowing for the memory to be altered, and even bettered. Wade isn’t the only one who pines for the ‘Good Ol’ Days.’ Halliday is the number one example of someone using memories to escape the present. Despite his horrible home life growing up, he makes an entire world in the OASIS dedicated to his hometown with every last detail included. Granted, it’s every detail as Halliday remembers it. In the article “You are then...”, Janelle Wilson said she believes that nostalgia is “a yearning to capture a mood or spirit that is unavailable in present-day discourse,” further noting that “even though these idealizations at one point constituted happiness or innocence, when viewed from the vantage point of the present these positive emotions may be inverted with a sense of loss and sadness” (Ruppel, 542). Either way, nostalgia is a form of escape.

Typically, people are more motivated to help individuals than groups of individuals. This is why when IOI destroyed Wade's neighborhood, he didn't get as upset as when IOI killed one of his friends in the OASIS. A study at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill discovered that "the collapse of compassion might be due to motivated emotion regulation" (Cameron, 12). Basically, people purposely control their feelings of sadness or anger during a mass-tragedy to avoid getting too hurt. This issue is worsened when technology and memories are used as an escape. It isn't until a person truly forces themselves to look at the world around them that they find the need to affect change. Cline is suggesting that we step away from the nostalgia and away from the technology and start opening our eyes to the world around us. After people do this, they are much happier. The book ends with Wade saying "that for the first time in as long as [he] could remember, [he] had absolutely no desire to log back in the OASIS" (Cline, 372). That might just be the answer.

Word Count: 1467

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