


The Price of Virtual Utopia: *Ready Player One* as American Dream and Dystopian Nightmare¹

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Abstract

Ernest Cline's novel *Ready Player One* (2011) is among the most popular science fiction texts of the twenty-first century. Renowned filmmaker Steven Spielberg directed its movie adaptation in 2018 and following the success of the book and film, Cline published the sequel *Ready Player Two* in 2020. What renders the novel a prime example of contemporary science fiction is its detailed portrayal of an advanced virtual reality and its possible societal implications. Another key aspect is its bipolar structure, consisting of a dystopian reality defined by ecological and social crisis and the virtual utopia OASIS.

This paper will demonstrate that *Ready Player One* represents virtual reality in a highly intermedial manner via the thematization and transposition of video games, music, and films. As I will showcase, this portrayal of VR is essential regarding the novel's world-building, its narrative structure, and the depiction of its characters. Furthermore, looking at the implied worldview of the novel, I would argue that the OASIS is shown to be a virtual realization of the American dream, a world in which social outcasts and discriminated minorities find a chance to embrace who they are, make friends, find love, and rise from rags to riches. I will consequently show that the novel's juxtaposition of utopia and dystopia is specifically tied to its treatment of its themes of identity, friendship, and love, and that it utilizes these focus points to show the possibilities that VR might offer in the future, whilst also underlining the risks it harbors.

Keywords

American Dream; Dystopia; Ernest Cline; Intermediality; Science Fiction; Utopia; Virtual Reality.

The red pill or the blue pill? This is the choice that Neo must make in one of the most iconic scenes of *The Matrix* (1999). The red pill offers knowledge of reality, whilst the blue pill would allow Neo to continue his ignorant existence in the virtual world of the matrix. Neo swallows the red pill, thus deciding to face reality. Quite soon this could be a decision that we all must make. Virtual reality is evolving, becoming harder and harder to distinguish from reality. Slowly but steadily, every area of human life is augmented and digitalized. Already in the 1980s, the influential French philosopher Jean Baudrillard argued in *Simulacra and Simulation* that we live in a world of “simulacra” (meaning imitations or substitutes), a hyperreality dominated by artificial constructs that do not follow certain models anymore yet are “a real without origin or reality” instead (1). Baudrillard argued that such a blurring of the lines between the real and the fictional might have dire societal consequences (121). He mused that consequently, the postmodern era would bring with it the destruction of true meaning altogether (160-61).

Certainly, the technological developments we see today in the areas of virtual reality and digitalization bring with them new fears and hopes. Might we one day lead completely transparent lives under constant surveillance as every drop of our data runs into the digital ocean of cyberspace? Could our idea of reality eventually lose its meaning? At the same time, visions of a virtual world without boundaries, a digital Eden, could offer a refuge for those grappling with the demands of modern life. What will the future of virtual reality hold in store for us? A dystopian nightmare or the final fulfillment of our age-long search for a truly democratic and egalitarian society?

Ernest Cline’s *Ready Player One* (2011) deals with these questions. It is a fast-paced, action-packed SF novel filled with colorful imagery, myriads of intermedial and intertextual references, and a dose of cyberpunk-ish flair. It also contains many references to the popular culture of the Eighties, including music, movies, and video games, which are embedded in an intratextual virtual reality that is decisively oriented on contemporary conceptions of VR². *Ready Player One* has quickly become a novel of cultural relevance, having sold over 1.7 million copies by 2020³, its popularity peaking in a successful movie adaptation by Steven Spielberg (2018) and the release of the sequel *Ready Player Two* (2020). I have chosen *Ready Player One* to be the primary focus of this paper for two main reasons. Firstly, it has become one of the most popular works of fiction of the twenty-first century regarding virtual reality and its societal implications. Secondly, the novel deals with VR in a way that unites intermedial practice with a strong focus on the interplay between technology and the concepts of utopia and dystopia.

Thus, I will focus on the following research questions. Firstly, how is VR represented in the novel and what are its functions regarding world-building,

narrative structure, and the portrayal of the characters? Secondly, based upon this representation of virtual reality, can *Ready Player One* be viewed as a utopian vision of the American dream (the OASIS) or is it rather a dystopian nightmare? Perhaps both? Therefore, I will first carry out a dissection of Cline's vision of the OASIS, in terms of its central role in the narrative world of the novel and its intermedial utilization of video games, music, film, and other media. The following section of the paper will be dedicated to a close examination of the implied worldview that can be deducted from the representation of VR in *Ready Player One*. Here I will illustrate that the OASIS can be viewed as the final virtual realization of the American dream, as it provides an environment defined by seemingly unbounded freedom and individualism in connection with the vertical mobility central to the ideal of the self-made man. However, as I will also showcase, this possible utopia is embedded in the darkness of a dystopian reality. As I will demonstrate, this juxtaposition of utopia and dystopia is specifically tied to the novel's treatment of the themes of identity, friendship, and love and it utilizes these focus points to show the possibilities that VR might offer in the future whilst also highlighting the central risk that humanity might forget about the real world.

Introduction to the Novel

It is the year 2045 and the world has fallen victim to an extreme energy and climate crisis that has caused severe social problems. The primary escape for most people is a virtual reality called the OASIS, a large online game that also serves as a social and work environment. Five years earlier, the creator of the OASIS, James Halliday, placed an Easter egg in this virtual reality, hidden behind three gates for which three keys are needed. Whoever manages to open the final gate and solve the last riddle will inherit the OASIS and with it Halliday's large fortune. In the course of the story, the reader follows Wade Watts (Parzival), a poor teenager who lives in the trailer park slums with his aunt and dreams of solving Halliday's riddle. He is a "gunter" (egg hunter) who spends all his spare time researching films, books, TV series, music, and video games from the 1980s. His best friend is another player, named Aech. As Wade stumbles upon a clue leading him directly to the first key, a grand treasure hunt through the vast digital universe of the OASIS ensues, during which Wade finds new friends – a female player called Art3mis, with whom he falls in love, and the Japanese gunters Daito and Shoto–, yet is also confronted with the ruthless actions of the powerful company IOI (Innovative Online Industries). Eventually, the friends succeed against IOI, and Wade manages to find the Easter egg, therefore inheriting the OASIS. In the aftermath of the events, Wade finally meets Art3mis in the real world and learns a lesson about the preciousness of reality.

Establishing Key Theoretical Terms and Notions

In my analysis of Ernest Cline's novel *Ready Player One*, two theoretical concepts serve as the foundation. Namely, the typology of intermediality by Werner Wolf and Jean Baudrillard's concept of the 'simulacrum.' Wolf's system was chosen due to it being an exceedingly detailed and practical framework for the categorization of intermedial phenomena. Baudrillard's notion of the 'simulacrum' will be a key part of the analysis due to its applicability to common philosophical concerns with Virtual Reality and its long-lasting philosophical influence in this area.

Intermediality in a general manner is defined by Gabriele Rippl as a concept of relationships between the media (1). According to Rippl, it is a term that is primarily applied to cultural products involving more than one medium (1). More specifically, Werner Wolf categorizes intermediality as intracompositional or extracompositional (17). The former concept, which is slightly more prevalent for this analysis, is defined by Wolf as:

[...] a direct or indirect participation of more than one medium of communication in the signification and/or semiotic structure of a work or semiotic complex, an involvement that must be verifiable within this semiotic entity. (17)

Wolf also suggests several sub-categories for both intracompositional and extracompositional intermediality (18-25). For the purposes of this paper, two of these categories suffice, namely 'intermedial reference', which is a kind of intracompositional intermediality (21), and 'transposition' (the transfer of content from one medium to another, a typical example of which is novel to film adaptation), a variety of extracompositional intermediality (18).

In Wolf's typology intermedial reference is further subdivided into explicit and implicit intermedial reference (23-24). Explicit intermedial reference (also termed 'intermedial thematization') is essentially any overt reference to another medium; for example, mentioning a song in a novel, or incorporating musicians and painters as characters in a literary work. Implicit intermedial reference (also termed 'media imitation') is, in contrast, focused on iconicity (24-25). As Wolf explains, this kind of intermedial reference 'imitates' traits of another medium or media product, which can be structural and formal elements and conventions (25).

From a more philosophical angle, my analysis of *Ready Player One* will employ Jean Baudrillard's concept of the 'simulacrum.' In *Simulacra and Simulation* Baudrillard argues that we live in a world dominated by artificial constructs, so called simulacra that constitute "a real without origin or reality" (1). Baudrillard (121) asks what would happen if the difference between the real

and the imaginary were to disappear eventually (121). His nihilistic conclusion is that with these developments of multiplying meanings in the media of postmodernity, our system of meaning will collapse from within (160–62). Indeed, I would argue that the core notion of the Baudrillardian concept of the ‘simulacrum’ is a dystopian one. To paraphrase the Baudrillardian critique, technology leads us toward a path of multiple realities and meanings that are not grounded in reality. As the line between reality and the simulacrum becomes increasingly more blurred, Baudrillard feared that our society would lose its common ground regarding the understanding of reality and truth.

A contemporary example of Baudrillard’s notion of a collapse of meaning is how social media platforms like Facebook led to an explosion of different meanings and perspectives during the Corona crisis and hence to the sprawling distribution of fake news. Indeed, this diversification of meaning and the blurring of the lines was fostered and exploited by political figures, leading to a strong division between different societal groups⁴. It can be argued, that the ‘Us vs. Them’ mentality that grew from this division⁵ on each side of the argument carried with it dystopian and anti-democratic implications since it is at its core a mechanism that is typical for totalitarian systems⁶. A more recent example of simulacra is the current trends in AI revolving around image creation. Examples of this, like Mid-Journey and DALLÉ, are clearly evolving towards “a real without origin or reality”. These photorealistic pictures can often not, or hardly, be distinguished from real imagery with the naked eye.

Literarily Programming Tomorrow: The Intermedial Future of Life and Work in the OASIS

The world of *Ready Player One* is distinctly split in two. On the one side, we have the reality; a dystopian future taking place in the year 2045 in which the world is suffering under extreme climate change, a continuing energy crisis, mass poverty, and widespread diseases and famine (1). Born into this catastrophic future, the protagonist and first-person narrator Wade Watts is shown to live in the so-called Portland Avenue stacks, a massively overloaded trailer park in which thousands of mobile homes are stacked on top of each other forming over 500 individual towers loosely connected (21). Here, he lives with his dubious aunt and her boyfriend Rick (20), in an area sprawling with poverty and criminality (22). On the other side, we have the virtual reality called OASIS; a seemingly utopian wonderland in which everything, from going to school (27), to socializing with friends (37), sports (72), video gaming (e.g. 78), and countless other kinds of entertainment is possible. It is a place that offers a level of individual fulfillment, upward mobility, and freedom akin to conceptions of the American dream, a potential safe space from the bleak reality that is already foregrounded via the virtual reality’s name, ‘OASIS.’ This

chapter will focus on the intermedial representation of this possibly utopian virtual reality and its implications on the novel's world-building, narrative structure, and character presentation.

Luckily, I had access to the OASIS, which was like having an escape hatch into a better reality. The OASIS kept me sane. It was my playground and my preschool, a magical place where anything was possible. The OASIS is the setting of all my happiest childhood memories. (Cline 18)

As this passage highlights early in the book, from the perspective of the main character the OASIS was like “a better reality” that shielded him from the influence of the run-down outside world and offered him a haven in which he was able to play and learn. It is explained that the OASIS has offered the protagonist Wade a childhood that he would not have had otherwise and has shaped his upbringing significantly. This fact is also illustrated via the explanation that Wade was placed in front of the screen as soon as he could “wear a visor and a pair of haptic gloves” (15), and that he essentially spent most of his childhood in the virtual world, where he learned “how to walk, talk, add, subtract, read, write, and share” (15). This exceeding importance that this virtual reality has in the protagonist's life also suggests that there might be other people in the novel's narrative world in whose lives the OASIS plays just as central a role. The book clearly implies this several times, most importantly on the first page, where it is stated that the OASIS is used by most of humanity on a daily basis (1), but also via the backstories of the other main characters, Aech, Art3mis, Daito, and Shoto.

The OASIS is explained to go back to the year 2012 (56). Gregarious Simulation Systems, the company of James Halliday and his business partner Ogden Morrow is said to have developed the “Ontologically Anthropocentric Sensory Immersive Simulation” (56) These five words already outline the essential features of the OASIS. Firstly, the word ‘ontological’ foregrounds that issues regarding existence and reality are central to the OASIS. After all, virtual reality is meant to provide an experience of a new kind of reality that has not existed before. Secondly, it is an ‘anthropocentric’ ‘simulation’ as it is centered on a human perspective and dedicated to human art and culture. Lastly, it is a “Sensory Immersive Simulation,” which shows that it is portrayed as a virtual world that constitutes such a well-rounded simulation that it can immerse the player in a multisensory manner. As later examples in the novel display, this includes seeing, hearing, smelling, tactile sensations, and thermosensation (e.g. 192-93). Wade is depicted to use a specific kind of headset called the OASIS visor (26), and a haptic suit (193). *Ready Player One* also features haptic gloves (26), a completely adjustable haptic chair (191), a

so-called “Olfatrix smell tower” that can generate more than two thousand different smells (192), and an omnidirectional treadmill (193). It is noteworthy, that a quick look at today’s VR industry unearths similar products, albeit in different stages of refinement⁷. In the novel, these technological gadgets allow players to be connected to the OASIS in a multi-sensory manner and are shown to enable them to perform a variety of activities during their time in virtual reality.

Furthermore, it is showcased that students can go to school in this virtual world. Through the description of several highly immersive lessons the novel illustrates what this virtual school in the OASIS looks like. For example, during a World History lesson, the teacher utilizes a simulation to take Wade and his classmates to Egypt in the year 1922 AD to experience the day that archaeologists found the tomb of King Tutankhamun (48). Here, it is also highlighted that just the day before, the class had been taken to a simulation of the same place in 1334 BC to witness the empire of Tutankhamun during its prime (48). On this page, the description of such wondrous lessons is continued as it is said that the class travels through a human heart in their biology class, visits the Louvre in Art, and journeys far away to the distant moons of Jupiter. These simulations might still have seemed slightly futuristic in 2011 when *Ready Player One* was published, yet today gadgets like the Oculus headset would allow teachers to take their students to the moon and back.

Indeed, as Eva M. Frick and Daniela Leopold (66) underline, video game simulations are already in use when it comes to environmental education. They argue that this kind of gamified education allows students to observe environmental issues regarding their causality as the consequences of certain actions can be seen and experienced right away. Furthermore, as Kyle A. Knabb et al. point out, VR is also used in archeology, which is a field that works with data that is well-suited for “3D modeling and visualization” (228). They further state that their institution, the Qualcomm Institute in San Diego, California, employs three particularly immersive, so-called CAVE (Cave Automatic Virtual Environment) environments that enable people to experience a realistic simulation of the archeological sites (Knabb et al. 228). According to the website Viar360.com, VR devices are already in use at several universities and schools for teaching purposes – for example, at NC State University, USA, in biology classes with a focus on field-based experiences, at The Mendel Grammar School in Opava City, Czech Republic, where the Oculus Rift is used to teach students the anatomy of the eye, or at Drury University in Springfield, USA, in architecture classes.

Aside from educational purposes, the virtual world in the novel provides users with the possibility to take part in a variety of sports and numerous leisure time activities, including both typical sports like volleyball,

soccer, and football, and sports that only work in a virtual environment like “Quidditch” and “zero-gravity Capture the Flag” (Cline 72), chat rooms for socializing purposes (37), dance clubs (183-85), access to the collected art and knowledge of humanity (16), and thousands of worlds to explore (57).

Furthermore, the OASIS is also presented as a place of economic and political importance. For example, it is foregrounded numerous times that a considerable number of people work within the OASIS, for example, telemarketers (15), escorts (15), teachers (e.g. 48), programmers (51), professional players who work for IOI (140), and technical support (e.g. 206, 285). Moreover, the virtual reality has its own currency, the OASIS credit, which is said to be more stable and higher in value than established currencies like the Dollar, Pound, Euro, or Yen (28). It is also made clear that the OASIS is a place of considerable economic opportunities as businesses that want to sell their goods in the virtual world must rent virtual space (59). A final essential point regarding life within the OASIS is that there are even elections that take place in the virtual world (201). Here, once more, the virtual world is decisively contrasted with the real one. Wade is displayed to state that the ‘real’ elections do not matter anymore as they are only for show and people can only elect “movie stars, TV personalities, and radical televangelists” (201). Amusingly, however, he explains that he votes for the SF author Cory Efram Doctorow and Wil Wheaton in the OASIS elections, one of the actors from the SF series *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (201).

Now, beyond these technological aspects and the sheer endless activities that the OASIS is shown to offer, the core activity within the OASIS is still gaming. Throughout the novel, VR video gaming is presented in a decisively intermedial manner as the novel continuously evokes and highlights typical video game features, concepts, and aesthetics, thus practicing intermedial thematization. As I will demonstrate, this process of thematization is arguably an essential aspect of the novel’s world-building, narrative structure, and the portrayal of Wade Watts.

Right at the beginning of the novel (5-6), it is explained that the deceased designer of the OASIS, James Halliday, has hidden an elaborate riddle within his virtual realm and that the person who manages to solve the riddle and finds the Easter egg will inherit the OASIS, and with it immeasurable wealth. To some extent, the OASIS presents the people’s paradise, as it is their primary form of escape from their nightmarish reality. Hence there is an almost religious significance to this epic quest for the egg. In a sense, the God and creator of utopia has died, and now he offers the one who can complete his trial to take his place. One important example of intermedial thematization is the ‘Easter egg’ that lies at the end of the quest. Easter eggs are a typical feature of video games. They are usually simply hidden secrets that sometimes

reference other works of fiction or art⁸. This revolving of the novel around an Easter egg is one of the key aspects concerning its narrative structure and logic as it renders the text a typical video-game treasure hunt comprised of quests, riddles, and adventures. Indeed, in the novel, there is a vast array of different explicit intermedial references (intermedial thematization) to video games, adding to this narrative structure and the aligned process of world-building. There are, for example, scenes in which Wade is shown to play a video game within the OASIS (e.g. 81-82, 105, 222), thus playing a game within a game which constitutes an interesting example of *mise en abyme*. Essentially, these games within a game mirror the underlying concept of the OASIS and the novel's story in a straight-forward structural sense. Moreover, as classic games such as *Joust* (81-82), the text-based adventure *Dungeons of Daggorath* (105), and *Pac-Man* (222) are not only alluded to but also explained in detail regarding their rules and game mechanics, I would argue that their incorporation also qualifies as intermedial transposition. This aspect is particularly important for the reader's imagination of the novel's narrative world as these video games are employed in a manner that stirs the individual game graphics and aesthetics into the imaginative mix that is the novel's representation of its fictional world.

There are many smaller examples of intermedial thematization scattered throughout the novel that invigorate the readers' impression that they are immersing themselves in a video game narrative and environment. For instance, there are the highly game-like elements of the dungeon that the protagonist is traversing on his search for the first key, the Tomb of Horrors. Examples of this are the importance of the map as a tool that displays where the monsters will appear, hidden treasures, and magical items, and Parzival gaining experience points through his actions (77-78). Another interesting detail is the implementation of no-pvp zones (e.g. 89 and 162), which are areas in the world of the OASIS where players cannot fight with one another. The employment of these zones in which characters cannot attack each other, not even during an all-out war scenario (162), creates again a somewhat paradoxical and amusing effect, especially when bombs exploding in close proximity to players cannot harm them. After all, there are no such things as safe zones in the real world. Another typical game element is the recurring scoreboard (e.g. 113, and 160), which continuously ranks the top egg-hunters like Wade, Art3mis, Aech, and the IOI commander Sorrento and displays how many points they have gained.

One other example of combined intermedial thematization and transposition that needs to be addressed is the re-enactment of film scenes within the novel (108-12 and 356-58). In these scenes, Wade is shown to find himself in two interactive simulations of popular movies, namely *War*

Games (1983) and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975). These scenes are interactive simulations of movies within a virtual reality that is depicted in a work of literature, thus constituting a kind of three-layered intermediality that utilizes the fact that the reader has already become familiarized with the idea of envisioning the OASIS as a virtual reality despite it being simply a concept within a work of literature. Because of the reader's familiarity with this first-order intermedial connection and the general two-sidedness of the narrative that renders the virtual reality the place to be, it is made decisively easy for the reader to take another imaginative leap and delve into a movie-simulation within a virtual reality within a novel. Both of these movie-references also classify as *mise en abymes* in the sense that their narratives share essential aspects of their fictional worlds and narratives with the novel, for example, hacking and war-simulations (*War Games*) and a treasure hunt with religious implications (*Monty Python and the Holy Grail*).

From a Baudrillardian perspective the multifaceted virtual world of *Ready Player One*'s 'OASIS' can be classified as a universe of simulacra. It is a virtual space that is, for the most part, detached from reality. It contains an array of avatars, planets, economic opportunities, sports, and entertainment that are essentially separated from the intratextual reality of the novel. Although a clear correlation between the 'liveliness' of the virtual world and the bleakness of the seemingly neglected dystopian reality within the novel is not part of the story⁹, a certain negative influence of the OASIS is underlined by the character of Ogden Morrow, one of the two founders of Gregarious Simulation Systems. He is shown to state that he left the company because the OASIS had become "a self-imposed prison for humanity" and "[a] pleasant place for the world to hide from its problems while human civilization slowly collapses, primarily due to neglect" (120). This negative view expressed through one of the characters aligns itself well with Baudrillard's nihilistic stance on the overarching cultural power of the simulacra. Although this critical perspective is essential to the implied worldview of the novel (this will be shown later in more detail), I would argue that two essential aspects of the OASIS speak against such a purely negative view of the virtual setting of the novel.

Firstly, throughout the novel, the OASIS is presented as an archive that preserves the treasures of human culture containing the collected art and knowledge of humanity (16)¹⁰. This aspect of celebration and preservation of human art in all its forms is emphasized via the aforementioned intermedial thematizations and transposition of films and video games, as well as literary references (e.g. 62), paintings (e.g. 77), comic books (e.g. 15), and music (e.g. 259-63). This celebratory aspect is quite interesting, as one widespread and general fear regarding VR technology is that it might become so immersive

and addicting that eventually, other forms of art will not be able to remain within the realm of public attention. Instead, the novel showcases how a virtual reality like the OASIS could become a realm that celebrates human creative ingenuity in all its forms by rendering it accessible to everyone and inscribing it into the intermedial essence of the virtual world. Regarding the classification of the OASIS as a world of simulacra one would also have to critically assess what “a real without origin or reality” would be in this case. In fact, it could be argued that hardly anything in the virtual reality within *Ready Player One* is really without a connection to its outside reality, and particularly not the media products. Hence, it seems that Baudrillard’s concept of the ‘simulacrum’ is better applied to a virtual universe as a whole and its illusory effects rather than to separate it into a web of individual simulacra.

Secondly, for the protagonist there is undeniably a strong positive side to the OASIS and its vast ocean of possibilities. As has been outlined, there are numerous scenes in which the fact is stressed that the virtual world offered Wade an education, a sense of happiness and purpose, and also a social environment that he would not have had in the outside world within the novel. These positive and partly utopian aspects of the OASIS will be dealt with in closer detail in the following chapter, however, it should already be noted here with regard to the world-building and character presentation of the novel that the virtual world is implied to be a source of meaning for the lives of Wade and countless other people, rather than a force of meaning-negation. One example of this is how the representation of human art is portrayed not only as an essential feature of the world but also of its main character. It is through shown or told media interaction that key moments of the protagonist’s young life and his adventures are highlighted. For example, it is mentioned that the media research carried out by Wade on his search for Halliday’s egg has become a central and positive part of his life (e.g. 19, 62-64). Furthermore, via the intermedial presentations of scenes like Wade’s adventure in the Tomb of Horrors (e.g. 77-78) or his playing of the song “Discovery” by Rush on a virtual electric guitar (263), there is a level of excitement attributed to his experiences that renders his character tangible and relatable. Consequently, as has been shown through several examples in this chapter, the OASIS is not only a necessary part of the novel’s world-building and video game-esque narrative structure but also of critical importance to a deeper understanding of the novel’s main character.

Utopia or Dystopia

Regarding the positive aspects of VR presented in the novel, one quintessential question must be asked: Could a virtual reality like the OASIS become humanity’s long-awaited utopia; the American dream complete? I would argue that the

novel aims to portray such a utopian virtual wonderland to which people can escape from their unpleasant reality. However, as I will show, the novel also clearly contains a critical perspective regarding the risks that such a utopian virtual reality could harbor. Entailed in this viewpoint is also a critical position toward its central concept, the OASIS. I will now demonstrate that both sides of the coin are fundamental to a deeper understanding of *Ready Player One*.

As has already been highlighted, the real world within *Ready Player One* and the virtual world known as OASIS are presented in a quite contrary manner. The reality in the year 2045 is a prime example of a dystopia. It is marked by climate catastrophes, hunger, poverty, sickness, and lack of electricity (Cline 1). It is a place where children like Wade are educated by technological tools as their fathers are killed on the streets (15) and their mothers fall victim to drug consumption (19), and where myriads of people are forced to live in decrepit trailer parks dominated by poverty, crime, and all-encompassing uncertainty (20-21). Schools are depicted as places ruled by unsafety and negativity as bullies and drug addicts threaten children both in school and on their way home (32). Additionally, it is emphasized in the novel that in this future, democracy has become an empty phrase (201), as there are no competent politicians to vote for anymore. Instead, the world is depicted to be ruled by powerful companies like IOI, who are shown to take whatever action is necessary to increase their economic power, for example, the killing of innocent people (145, 242) and forcing people into a form of debt slavery (278).

In sharp contrast to the extremity of the real-world dystopia of *Ready Player One*, the OASIS offers a utopian world in which everything seems better. The OASIS is portrayed as a safe place where people find friends (e.g. 38-39 and 243), fall in love (179), experience fantastic adventures (e.g. 334-40), get educated at “grand palace[s] of learning” (32), do sports (72), party (183-85), play video games (78), listen to music (16), and much more.

I would argue that one implicitly central idea to *Ready Player One*'s juxtaposition of utopia and dystopia is the American dream. The term “American dream” was coined by James Truslow Adams in his 1931 book *The Epic of America*. Here, he praises “that American dream of a better, richer, and happier life for all of our citizens of every rank” and calls it “the greatest contribution we have as yet made to the thought and welfare of the world” (7). As Reeve Vanneman and Lynn Weber Cannon explain regarding this cultural concept:

More than any nation, America has celebrated itself as the land of opportunity. Immigrants came to the New World to escape European class barriers. In America, wealth and position were to be organized

differently— open to every person of talent and hard work. The frontier beckoned to those seeking a new chance. (257)

As I will demonstrate in this section, these ideas of opportunity, freedom, individualism, and the very central image of the self-made man indeed align themselves well with *Ready Player One*'s virtual society. I would argue that the novel's treatment of the three themes of identity, friendship, and love in particular fits exceedingly well into the idealistic framework of the American dream, especially concerning the OASIS. It is in the virtual realm that the main characters find social and monetary opportunities through their actions and talents. The virtual world also becomes the new frontier, providing unoccupied space, new opportunities, and heroic conflict. Additionally, it is there that Wade and his friends find the social success that they are shown to be denied in the real world. As I will demonstrate in this chapter, it is also all the more telling that the group's 'professional' success as gamers in the virtual world directly leads to a high level of real-world success. Hence, the story is a clear example of the rags-to-riches mentality – one of the foundational notions of the American dream.

Throughout the text, it is discussed whether an authentic identity, especially in aspects such as character, friendship, and love, can be fostered through the use of virtual reality. For example, as I have shown, Wade and a considerable number of other characters are displayed as having become alienated from the real world and spending most of their time in VR. Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that Wade is portrayed as having spent the greater part of his life within the OASIS from an early age. Considering these points, it becomes clear that people such as Wade spend decisively more time in the identity of their in-game avatars than they do in their real-world identity. This fact already leads us to question which identity the primary one is in such a case. Should we even consider Wade as Wade, or rather as 'Parzival'?

Firstly, the novel showcases how the OASIS allows people to free themselves from the shackles of their 'real' identities and the corresponding social discrimination. Suddenly, it does not matter anymore that Wade is chubby and poor (32), that Aech is an obese, African American lesbian (320), or that Art3mis has a birthmark on her face (370). In their digital identities, they are freed from the discrimination they face in the real world. The OASIS also serves as an essential foundation for their lives as it is highlighted that it provides free education and free access to the cultural riches of humanity to everybody (15-16). Also, in the course of the novel, the main characters are shown to become the engineers of their own identities, and tellingly, all three of them manage to escape poverty because of their success in the game

world in the course of the novel (e.g., 368), which aligns itself well with the individualistic and egalitarian notions of the American dream.

The next essential theme regarding the portrayal of identity in the novel is friendship. Throughout *Ready Player One*, it is repeatedly shown that people can actually find real friendships in a virtual world, despite everyone having a constructed identity. In general, this is exemplified by the teamwork of Parzival, Aech, Art3mis, Shoto, and Daito which eventually leads to their success against IOI (366-68). This aspect of cooperation of players from different parts of the world (the USA and Japan) also underlines the global idea behind the novel. Although the book takes place in America, it is foregrounded throughout the text that people from all over the world live, work, and play in the OASIS. Thus, the virtual fight against IOI is a worldwide affair in which people from different cultural backgrounds take part. Concerning the issue of genuine online friendships, one example is provided by the online 'brotherhood' between Shoto and Daito (243). These two Japanese characters are said to have bonded strongly over the activity of playing together, so much so that they truly consider themselves to be brothers even though they have never seen each other in real life (243). A similar kind of close friendship is also displayed in the relationship between Wade (Parzival) and Helen (Aech), who, despite having only known each other in their virtual identities, consider themselves truly best friends (321). This is explained in quite an interesting manner:

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. (Cline 321)

This is a strong passage regarding the novel's themes of identity and friendship. Via this example, the book puts forth a definition of friendship that is decisively focused on the interaction of two minds. Indeed, once again considering the state of things outside of the OASIS the explanation makes sense. These characters are portrayed as living in a world where virtual reality is seemingly the only world worth living in, and after all, they are said to spend almost all their time in this virtual universe. Hence, why would these characters value friendships fostered in 'reality' as more valuable than those that have come about in the OASIS? Even if we leave aside the social situation of the characters, this valuation of a purely mental friendship is an interesting concept. With this idea, the text reminds us that in essence, we are our

minds. Every other aspect of our identity, from the shape of our bodies to our ethnicity, our sexual orientation, and our financial and social situation does not determine our value as people. Only our personality does.

With the same mentality, the novel portrays the love between Wade (Parzival) and Samantha (Art3mis). Throughout the second half of the novel, it is repeatedly stated that Wade has fallen madly in love with Art3mis (e.g. 179 and 186). Just like the friendships depicted in *Ready Player One*, this love comes about via virtual interaction between the two players. Yet, Art3mis is portrayed as someone who is exceedingly critical of online friendship and love (186) and is shown to simply deny Wade's feelings as unreal. In this conversation with Art3mis, Wade already makes the same argument he puts forth later regarding his friendship with Aech. He tells Art3mis that he is in love with her mind, with her as a person, and that he will prove that even though they have only met online his feelings for her are genuine (186). Additionally, the depiction of their love contains an interesting twist that is significant for the implied worldview. When the two eventually meet in the final chapter of the novel, Wade is blown away by Samantha's beauty (371). In this scene it becomes clear that Wade's feelings for Samantha have, indeed, been genuine and that he truly loves her – an emotional bond that is not weakened by her birthmark (371). However, it is also made clear that the sensation of meeting one's love in real life is something that VR simply cannot simulate, a fact that is especially emphasized as Wade is shown to mention that for once he had no desire of logging into the OASIS (372).

The treatment of the novel's key themes of identity, friendship, and love lends itself to a primarily utopian perspective. In contrast to the outside world that is defined by prejudice and overarching negativity, the OASIS is portrayed as an egalitarian world in which questions of gender, ethnicity, and physical appearance can finally be left behind. In a time when the discrimination of people because of aspects of their identity is often at the center of social and media attention – such as issues regarding non-binary gender identities, discrimination of Muslims and African Americans, and the weight shaming of overweight people –, it is not too far-fetched to view the OASIS as a significant improvement and a final realization of the age-old promise of America. Yet, there is also a dark side to the novel's depiction of a virtual utopia.

What happens if we stop caring about changing reality because we have substituted it with a new and 'better' reality? And what is reality truly worth? These questions bring us once again back to Baudrillard's concerns regarding a world dominated by simulacra. At first glance, Baudrillard's nihilistic prophecy seems to be unwarranted as Wade and the other characters are shown to thrive in the virtual world and become the best versions of themselves by focusing on moral values rather than capitalistic gains. Yet all

the while reality has become a wasteland. Thus, from this angle, Baudrillard's fear of a world that has lost its values becomes strikingly true. On the one hand, *Ready Player One* showcases a seemingly utopian virtual reality, yet on the other hand, it displays earth in its death throes. A world in which people have become so immersed in the OASIS that they have stopped caring for the outside world. Accompanying this overt neglect of the real world is also the sinister implication of its repercussions. One day, the energy and climate crisis might become so extreme that electricity simply becomes a thing of the past and the people in the future of *Ready Player One* might all of a sudden find themselves back in conditions resembling the stone age, in a completely depraved, dystopian society. Virtual reality in *Ready Player One* is displayed to be both a blessing as it provides a form of escapism, which is shown to have led to humanity running away from its problems instead of solving them. Even though the egalitarian features of the OASIS are presented in a considerably positive manner that is reminiscent of the American dream, they also carry with them the unspoken implication that instead of simply fleeing from an unjust reality people should try to actively bring upon the change that they would like to see.

Conclusion

Ernest Cline presents an exceedingly bipolar vision of the future in *Ready Player One* as he combines a global dystopia, plagued by natural and societal disasters and controlled by corporate powers, with a virtual utopia. As has been demonstrated, the core intricacies of the novel lie within its portrayal of the positive and negative aspects of the virtual reality OASIS. One foundation of James Halliday's virtual world is its many intermedial details that render the OASIS and the experiences of the characters authentic and tangible. The other central aspect are exactly these experiences. Via the successful struggle of Wade, Aech, Art3mis, Daito, and Shoto for opportunity, identity, love, and friendship the novel showcases many of the positive sides a truly realized VR might have. From the thus fostered perspective, the adventures of Wade and his friends align themselves with the idea of the American dream as they rise from a background in relative poverty to stardom and social as well as monetary success through their own efforts. Moreover, the way the novel deals with themes of identity, love, and friendship also puts forth thought-provoking questions regarding what makes us human. Are we our minds? And could we thus realize our humanity completely in a virtual world? In connection with these echoes of Descartes's 'cogito, ergo sum,' the novel's portrayal of a virtual preservation of cultural treasures, and consequently of cultural meaning, becomes a philosophical counterpoint to the nihilistic concerns of Jean Baudrillard. Perhaps there will not be a complete loss of

meaning as our world is filled and augmented by the emergence of hyper realistic artificial constructs. However, as I have shown, the novel's implied worldview is not without a critique of virtual reality. Beyond the OASIS, the world of *Ready Player One* is a clear-cut dystopia and it is via issues such as the dangers of humanity's neglect of the real world, the uncertainty of the future of the OASIS, and most importantly, the unquestionable value of reality, displayed in its purest form as love, that the problematic side of humanity escaping into a virtual universe is foregrounded.

Consequently, I would argue that *Ready Player One* presents a multifaceted portrayal of the dystopian and utopian possibilities that the future might hold in store for us, both regarding the advent of virtual reality and the crises humanity might have to endure. Accordingly, the novel's implied worldview contains a deep sense of appreciation for that which is truly real, whilst also underlining the happiness that human ingenuity, both technological and artistic, can manifest within our hearts.

Notes

¹ This paper is a revised version of chapters from my (unpublished) diploma thesis: *Generation Simulation: Representations of Virtual Reality in Novels* by William Gibson, Haruki Murakami, Cixin Liu, and Ernest Cline.

² This employment of state-of-the-art VR technology in the novel is also foregrounded by Charlie Fink in his online article "The Reality of Virtual Reality In *Ready Player One*." He argues that *Ready Player One* was a quite prescient novel as many of its ideas of VR and VR culture have either already been realized or could soon be.

³ According to Publishers Weekly.

⁴ For example, this has been highlighted by Concordia University researcher Najmeh Khalili-Mahani regarding the divisive role of US President Donald Trump's Twitter use in the COVID crisis and the general social-media tribalism that emerged during the crisis.

⁵ Indeed, according to Devlin Kat, et al. a public survey of the Pew Research Center in 2021 carried out in 17 economically advanced countries has shown that people from all around the world viewed their countries as more socially divided during the corona crisis. Most extreme were the results in the US with 88 percent affirming the division.

⁶ For instance, this is highlighted by Chris Lebron, associate professor of Philosophy at Johns Hopkins University, in an article for the *Boston Review* (2017). He argues that the 'us vs. them' mentality is one of the central traits of totalitarian systems.

Notes

⁷ There is, for example, the Oculus Rift VR headset, the HaptX haptic gloves, bHaptic body suits, the haptic chair by the company Razer, Olorama's smell software, and Infinadeck's omnidirectional treadmill, just to name a few.

⁸ This definition is quite general. In essence, Easter eggs can be embedded references to all kinds of things, from history and mythology to typical cultural tropes and even politics.

⁹ It is never explained in detail if people emigrated towards the virtual world because their reality had gotten so bleak, or rather if the real world went downhill due to the focus of humanity on the virtual world.

¹⁰ In a similar spirit, the Museum of Videogames (Cline 217-18) is said to contain "at least one copy of every coin-operated videogame ever made" (217) and recreations of thousands of gaming arcades that used to exist in the real world serve as a nostalgic celebration of the history of video games.

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Biography

Philip Steiner is currently a PhD student at the American Studies Department at the University of Graz. His research interests include intermediality, science fiction, and metafiction. He has so far published one essay on portrayals of disability in science fiction and a paper on intermediality and virtual reality in Cixin Liu's *The Three-Body Problem*. Furthermore, Philip Steiner presented on postmodern aesthetics in modern science fiction at the sf-senses conference of the American Studies Department at the University of Warsaw. He is currently working as a journalist at RegionalMedien Salzburg. Aside from work, Philip Steiner is involved as a vocalist in the band projects AeonNihilation, Grey Skies Ahead, and Abditory. He also writes creatively and has published several short stories.