Identity through Performance and Play: Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One*

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Abstract

Ready Player One (2011), by Ernest Cline, takes place in a bleak future where the only purpose for living is winning the MMORPG Oasis. The characters in Cline's novel spend the majority of their lives in the Oasis: attending school, forming relationships, and participating in quests. This paper considers how the three main characters of Cline's novel interact in the Oasis (individually and socially through their avatars). Art3mis, Aech, and Wade each have differences between their "true" selves and their self-created avatars. What does it mean that Wade is able to perform as a taller, thinner, blemish-free version of himself; that Aech plays a Caucasian broad-shouldered male when she is in fact an overweight, African-American lesbian; that Art3mis performs an identity that hides her deformity? What does it mean when relationships—both amiable and romantic—are formed through these performances? Despite these compelling questions that a novel such as Cline's raises, an area devoid of scholarship in both game studies and literary studies is video game literature: literature that centers on gaming and the complexities of these created worlds. Through attention to play and identity in Cline's novel, in this paper I propose that gaming literature is a productive site to consider embodiment, identity, and acceptance as it occurs both in virtual worlds and in "real" life.

Introduction

It is 2044, and the world is in a "Global Energy Crisis"—resources are scarce, living situations are bleak, and the climate is shifting dramatically (Cline 17). The only purpose for living is winning the massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) OASIS. The characters in Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* spend the majority of their lives in the OASIS—attending school, forming relationships, and participating in the ultimate quest to win James Halliday's fortune. This paper considers how Wade, the protagonist and narrator of Cline's novel, interacts with his best friend Aech and his romantic interest Art3mis—both in the OASIS, individually and socially through their avatars, and also outside of the OASIS or, in other words, in real life (IRL). Wade, Aech, and Art3mis each have differences between their true (as in real life) selves and their self-created avatars. What does it mean that Wade is able to perform as a taller, thinner, blemish-free version of himself, that Aech plays a Caucasian male when she is in fact an African-American lesbian, and that Art3mis performs an identity that hides her

deformity? What does it mean when relationships—both amiable and romantic—are formed through these performances? These are some of the questions that frame my inquiry into the OASIS. Here, I examine issues of identity and play in Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* in order to propose that video game literature is a productive site to consider embodiment, performance, and acceptance—as it occurs both inside and outside of virtual spaces.

Game studies has been an active critical discipline since the mid-twentieth century; however, it was only in the late 1990s that scholars began widening their approach to video games—seeing them as important areas of study from sociological and cultural positions ("The Players Realm" 2). This development in game studies can be understood in relation to the corresponding rise of online video and computer games (OVCGs) which transformed not only the way players communicate with each other, but also the way players communicate (or perform) their identities through avatars: "computer-mediated fantasy characters" ("Gaming as Culture" 6). Game studies scholars like J. Patrick Williams and Adrienne Shaw have considered important issues in relation to gaming—such as community, gender, and representation. Outside of this discipline, however, there remains a reluctance to accept gaming as serious or meaningful—as a subject worthy of scholarly attention. An area devoid of scholarship in both game studies and literary studies is video game literature: fiction that centers on gaming and the complexities of these created worlds.

Due to the absence of literary scholarship on video game literature, this paper approaches *Ready Player One* through existing scholarship on identity and performance in game studies, as well as the application of Judith Butler's theory of performativity and Mikhail Bakhtin's views of carnival. Butler argues that gender is performative. Certain acts and desires are repeated (such as a baby girl being given a pink blanket), and it is this repetition that contributes to a fabricated normativity—a notion that is especially problematic for non-normative sexual identities (Butler 328-30). In addition to a more general consideration of how players perform through their avatars, Butler's theory is especially useful in observing how Aech, a lesbian, chooses to perform as a male in the OASIS. Bakhtin, in his theory of carnival, also considers identity fluidity as he proposes that carnival allows for an inversion of ordinary life: a place to be unconventional, bizarre, and inappropriate—to experiment with alternative forms of expression (251). This experimentation is allowed and even encouraged in virtual realities, and Bakhtin's attention to the role of carnival in various cultures emphasizes the importance of the carnivalesque space in society—this allowance for identity play (256). That being said, my intention is not to attempt a Butlerian or Bakhtinian reading of *Ready Player One,* but rather to examine issues of identity performance and play at work in Cline's novel in light of these theories. Bakhtin's theory of carnival and Butler's theory of gender performance, as applied to Cline's novel, suggest that we ask how self-creation through avatars is an important act

through which to consider the possibilities of identity.

Game Studies: Interplay of Narratology and Ludology

In game studies today, there are two popular approaches to video games. As Adrienne Shaw explains in *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gaming Culture*, there are "narratological approaches to games as cultural texts" and "ludological approaches to games as rule-bound play spaces" (37). Rather than view these positions as distinct, Shaw argues that "we must recognize the dialectical relationship" between them (37). By simply looking at video games as closed texts, a significant part of video games is occluded—audience interaction (Shaw 37). Audience interaction is of particular importance in role-playing games (RPGs)—such as Cline's OASIS—which allow people to play with identity in safe, meditated settings. There is a strong relationship between video games and fantasy and science-fiction, and role-playing games in particular tend to deal with more fantastic elements. While these interrelated realms were once considered more "subcultural," the editors of *Gaming as Culture* claim that they have become increasingly popular (2). *Reader Player One*, a sci-fi novel about video games, was a *New York Times bestseller*; however, if video games, fantasy, and science fiction are truly now more mainstream, the question persists as to why literature that centers on video games or gaming culture has not received academic attention. With this paper, I intend to encourage discussion of the undervalued sci-fi sub-genre of video game literature.

Of Two Worlds: OASIS & IRL

The OASIS, which stands for "Ontologically Anthropocentric Sensory Immersive Simulation," is not simply a game, as Wade says, it is "a new way of life" (Cline 48; 56). While there is a tendency to view virtual worlds as insignificant and purely fictitious, these virtual worlds provide a way of "re-enchanting life and of sustaining meaningful community experiences" (Chee et al. 154). For Wade, Aech, and Art3mis, the OASIS has always been part of their generation; it is how people work, learn, play, and form relationships (Cline 34). Wade's virtual high school looks so real that "it was easy to forget that everything you were seeing was computer-generated," and, if you had the latest technology, "it was almost impossible to tell the OASIS from reality" (Cline 27). The equipment used when accessing the OASIS is as interconnected to the player's body as possible, so that, when using the haptic gloves for example, the player is able to physically interact with the OASIS "as if they were actually inside it" (Cline 58).

In fantasy gaming there are two realities—that of the physical world that the player inhabits and the virtual or created world: the "fantasy reality" ("Gaming as Culture" 11-12). Because of the dual realities, there is an obvious fragmentation or multiplication of identity that occurs, and, as the editors of *Gaming as Culture* assert, "like fantasy and 'real world' realities, the

border between in-game and out-of-game identities is permeable and fuzzy" (13). As people began to use the OASIS as their sole means of communication, friendships and romantic relationships developed virtually, and "[t]he lines of distinction between a person's real identity and that of their avatar began to blur" (Cline 60). This hazy division between the player and the avatar is a central concern of Cline's novel as, up until the very end of the novel, Wade, Aech, and Art3mis know each other exclusively through their virtual embodiments in the OASIS. For the sake of this paper, Wade is the only character that I will be mentioning by his "real life" name. For the others, Aech and Art3mis, I will strictly refer to them by their avatar names as that is how Wade identifies them for the majority of the novel. The relationship between the player and the avatar has been of interest for numerous game studies scholars. Shaw claims that "[a]vatar-player relationships can be quite powerful and self-referential" as the avatar is how embodiment occurs in virtual spaces (113; 123). Similarly, Michelle Nephew contends that avatars are not simply characters that the players control but rather that the avatars are "their representatives in the game world, and representations of their players' inner selves" (136). While avatar creation might seem like a minor or superficial part of gaming, players—particularly in role-playing games—tend to invest significant thought and time into the creation of their virtual embodiments (Geraci and Geraci 332).

Because of the obvious connection between the player and the avatar, or, more generally, between the two worlds, it is necessary to consider the difference—that is, what the virtual world offers the player that the real world does not. In addition to being able to make physical changes to one's appearance, Mirjam Eladhari asserts that, in virtual game worlds, hierarchical constructs and societal limitations can be overturned (177). Wade, "the eighteen-year-old kid living in a trailer park on the outskirts of Oklahoma City," is not only the first person to make any progress in the Hunt for Halliday's hidden "Easter egg," but he is also the eventual winner and inheritor of the OASIS (Cline 9; 363). Therefore, the OASIS permits Wade to transcend limitations that might otherwise be impossible in the real world, and, furthermore, it allows him to eventually escape his poverty. While virtual game realities are still rule-bound, the rules are different, and certain factors such as sex, class, and appearance can be modified in drastic ways (Eladhari 177).

Performance through the Avatar

Performing through an avatar or character can be an emotionally significant act that allows the player "to both accept and transcend themselves" (Geraci and Geraci 340). In the virtual world, the body is forefront—as other players recognize you exclusively through your avatar, your virtual embodiment (Eladhari 179). The gift of anonymity, the "complete control over how you looked and sounded to others," is what draws many to the world of the OASIS (Cline 57). Even before they "meet" in the OASIS, Wade develops "a massive cyber-crush on Art3mis" through both her blog—

her "endearing, intelligent voice" and "self-deprecating humor and witty, sardonic asides"—and also through the screenshots she posts of her avatar (Cline 35). There is an emphasis placed on the way Art3mis's avatar differs from most female avatars; she is not "freakishly beautiful" but has a curvy body and a "face [that] had the distinctive look of a real person's" (Cline 35). Despite the attention to the unique physical appearance of Art3mis's avatar, she persistently tells Wade that she does not look anything like her avatar (Cline 178).

As Wade and Art3mis begin to spend more time together in the OASIS, he becomes consumed with the desire to meet her in real life (Cline 178; 211). While Wade wonders whether Art3mis might be "fifteen or fifty" or "some middle-aged dude named Chuck," their relationship is more than physical, as Wade admits, "I'd never felt such an instant connection with another person, in the real world or in the OASIS" (Cline 35; 92). However, Art3mis is adamant that Wade cannot love her because her avatar is not her "real body," and she tells him, "'If I ever let you see me in person, you would be repulsed'" (Cline 179). When Wade obtains access to Art3mis's file, he sees a girl "almost identical to her avatar" except for the large birthmark spread over half of her face (Cline 291). When Art3mis and Wade finally meet in real life, it is important to note that Art3mis has "her hair brushed back" so that Wade is able to fully see her defect (Cline 370). It is Wade's genuine feelings for Art3mis that empower her to no longer hide behind her avatar, or her hair, and to embrace who she is in real life. Nephew

asserts, "Role-playing allows the players to escape a sometimes harsh reality into a dreamworld in which they can re-assert their personal power and individual sense of worth" (125). However, it is not simply Art3mis's individual journey into the OASIS that facilitates her acceptance; this transformation is in large part due to her relationship with Wade. The love between Art3mis and Wade is not based on superficial notions of appearance but stems from a more transcendent intellectual and emotional connection.

Playing the Other

A primary concern of past game studies scholarship has been examining how areas of representation like gender have been depicted in harmful ways—such as through hypersexualization. More recently, however, scholars have begun considering "how players use, reject, or appropriate such sexualization" (Geraci and Geraci 329-30). The freedom permitted in virtual embodiment allows players to use video game spaces as way to subvert or reclaim identity—similar to how Butler suggests that empowerment and agency can occur through performance that is aware of gender construction (336). Wade's best friend Aech is a wealthy, high-ranking combatant whose avatar is "a tall, broad-shouldered Caucasian male with dark hair and brown eyes" (Cline 38). Unlike Art3mis's constant attention to the difference between her avatar and her true self, it is only right before Wade and Aech are expected to meet that Aech warns him: "'I don't look anything like my avatar'" (Cline 316-18). Wade is genuinely

surprised that the "renowned gunter" (hunter of Halliday's egg) and "ruthless arena combatant" is, in fact, as Aech says, "'a fat black chick'" (Cline 319). Consequently, Aech's performance both highlights and subverts gendered as well as racial stereotypes.

Performing as a white male avatar was, as Aech tells it, "'originally [her] mother's idea'" who was of the opinion that "the OASIS was the best thing that ever happened to both women and people of color" (Cline 320). Aech's mother used a white male avatar in order to be allowed more privileges, and she encouraged her daughter to also take advantage of this mutability (Cline 320). Geraci and Geraci write, "Videogames enable embodiment through the player's use of and identification with the in-game avatar; this virtual embodiment expresses cultural expectations, and enforces cultural norms, but also permits individual opportunities to reclaim, subvert, and/or transform these norms" (329). While Aech's mother used the white male avatar in ways that allowed her to transcend "norms," she did not, in fact, complicate them. Hiding behind a white male avatar—although drawing attention to matters of gender and race—is not in itself a subversive act. As in the case of Aech's mother, when someone plays the "Other" in an online space—for example, cross-identity performances in which a straight person performs as gay or a Caucasian male performs as an African-American male or female—it is "not necessarily or always oppressive, transgressive, or even perspective altering" (Shaw 139).

While it was acceptable to Aech's mother to perform as a white male in order to be given greater opportunity, it was not actually okay to be "masculine" or sexually attracted to women (Cline 321). Aech's mother's refusal to accept her daughter's sexual identity speaks to the prevailing notion that the virtual world is not connected to the real one. However, in video game worlds, "gender swapping" can be an emotionally significant performance as it allows players to re-think sexual identity in a "space open to non-normative versions of gender" (Geraci and Geraci 341-42). Additionally, as Eladhari asserts, "…it is ill-advised to trivialize the emotional impact of events involving the player's own character" (183). Ultimately, Wade's relationships with Aech and Art3mis indicate that virtual relationships have the power to transcend prejudices or superficial connections based on race or gender—and this emotional response should not be trivialized simply because it occurs in a virtual space.

Video Game Literature: Possibilities of Identity and Acceptance

Questions of identity and representation matter in literary and game studies because they are significant in both virtual game worlds and in real life. Video games provide an outlet for people to enact and subvert various identity constructs, to transcend real world limitations, and to form authentic relationships. The fact that Aech in real life does not resemble Aech's avatar initially feels like an act of betrayal to Wade—even though he is fully aware that in the OASIS people can be whoever they want

to be (Cline 318). However, once the initial shock passes, the more intimate, mental connection is restored between Wade and Aech, as Wade admits, "I realized that we already *did* know each other…in the most intimate way possible. We'd connected on a purely mental level…None of that had changed, or could be changed by anything as inconsequential as her gender, or skin color, or sexual orientation" (Cline 321). In the OASIS, where players "exist as nothing but raw personality," they are able to communicate and connect through their avatars in ways that are meaningful and true. Moreover, through virtual embodiment, bodily differences are able to be explored more readily and tangibly than in other more restrictive environments—potentially leading to both greater diversity and acceptance. Video game worlds allow for acts of self-creation that engage in the possibilities of identity, and works of video game literature, such as *Ready Player One*—which speak so powerfully to embodiment, transformation, and understanding—warrant further academic attention.

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