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What Gamers Are Really After

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Ernest Cline, *Ready Player One* (Crown, 2011).

It is so tempting simply to dismiss video games altogether. After all, even the most casual games take up time that could be better spent on something more valuable. More serious gamers can devote hours each day to playing, an investment of time that is hard for many to even begin to understand. I know of a software developer who voluntarily reduced his work week from 40 to 30 hours—with a corresponding pay cut—simply to devote more time to playing video games.

While many of us spend too much time on low value activities, there is not much else than substance abuse or compulsive gambling that compares to video games. Numerous [articles](#) and [books](#) have documented that potentially millions of young people are withdrawing from society —avoiding close relationships and dropping out of or underperforming in the workforce—because they devote most of their time to gaming. Even the most gluttonous binge-watching on Netflix or unhealthy obsession with golf has not generated a huge cohort of young people withdrawing from life.

This leads to the question of why. Why do people lose themselves to these games so completely? And similarly to other addictions, why are some people able to enjoy video games in moderation while some become completely trapped?

Ready Player One, a popular science fiction book by Ernest Cline, offers interesting insights into these questions. While it doesn't claim to be a serious, idea-driven book—it's more of a beach read—it touches on important topics from the perspective of someone immersed in video game culture. And that inside view is, I believe, immensely powerful. Cline doesn't seem to feel any urge to dismiss video games. Quite the contrary: much of *Ready Player One* is a celebration of video games. Surprisingly, though, the emotional heart of the book is a strong warning against losing oneself to gaming. This dichotomy within the book, the reveling in video games on one hand and fear of their potential harm to individuals and society on the other, allows Cline to offer insights into why people would be drawn to video games that would be hard to find in more purely critical works from outside of video game culture.

The book is set in a dystopian future where most of humanity spends its time in a shared virtual reality world called the OASIS which is part video game and part alternate reality. The main character of the book, Wade Watts, is a young, orphaned high-school senior trying to find his way in a world that has collapsed economically and socially. He is practically homeless and only has the slimmest support from extended family. He also checks all of the stereotypical boxes of a nerdy teenager ripe for transformation as part of a coming of age story: overweight, socially awkward, without fashionable clothes, and bullied by his peers in school.

Interestingly, the deeply traumatic life that Wade lives in the real world is described matter-of-factly and is accepted with a certain hopelessness. He deals with the problems in the real world, but without striving to change them. In many ways, the tragic real world is simply a distraction that must be dealt with before Wade can enter the OASIS.

The OASIS is where Wade actually lives. It's where, as a child, educational programs taught him to read, write, play, and socialize. It's where he attends high school and spends time watching movies and playing video games with his one true friend, another gamer. It's the internet, popular culture, and video games wrapped up in a shared virtual space that allows Wade and millions of others to escape the dreary real world. And for Wade, it's where he is actually able to find some amount of happiness.

The happiness that Wade finds isn't typically presented as coming solely from the video games themselves. While the OASIS, and video games in general, are presented as engrossing to the point of addictiveness, that's not their only appeal. They aren't a hard drug where one hit is enough to hook you for life. Instead, this virtual world meets a wide range of Wade's social and emotional needs.

For example, throughout the book Wade is presented as deeply committed to striving to be the best gamer that he can be. He methodically practices to gain new skills and hone existing skills. His approach to gaming is very much like that of a serious athlete or musician rather than someone simply playing games for fun. While gaining these skills gives Wade a sense of purpose and a feeling of accomplishment, they are also a way for him to gain social standing among his peers and—eventually—within society at large.

In the book, much of this focus on game-playing skills is in the context of the main driver of the plot: a game within the OASIS programmed by the creator of the world, James Halliday, and revealed upon his death. The winner of this game is set to receive all of Halliday's wealth as well as control of the OASIS. Given the singular importance of the OASIS in this future world, victory would reward the winner of the game with immense wealth and power.

While this particular motivator is, clearly, unique to the imagined world of the book, there are similarities to serious "real-life" gaming. Esports events, where teams and individuals play video games competitively, *fill entire stadiums with viewers while millions at home watch live video streams*. Twitch TV, an Amazon-owned internet service that allows gamers to broadcast themselves playing video games to be watched by others, *has an average of 1.2 million viewers at all times of the day and night*. Over 4 million unique gamers stream themselves playing each month and the top *streamers can make hundreds of thousands of dollars a year*. Serious gamers can aspire to real-world success and recognition and, while few actually find that success, the mere possibility can, like with sports or music, drive people to take their efforts much more seriously.

For many who struggle to find a place and standing in the real world, the possibility of gaining importance in video games is enormously attractive. They can channel their disappointments and frustrations in the real world into becoming heroes in their virtual worlds. Wade contemplates this explicitly at the height of his obsessive gaming:

Then I paused and spent a moment staring at my [video gaming] rig. I'd been so proud of all this high-tech hardware when I'd first purchased it. But over the past few months, I'd come to see my rig for what it was: an elaborate contraption for deceiving my senses, to allow me to live in a world that didn't exist. Each component of my rig was a bar in the cell where I had willingly imprisoned myself.

Standing there, under the bleak fluorescents of my tiny one-room apartment, there was no escaping

the truth. In real life, I was nothing but an antisocial hermit. A recluse. A pale-skinned pop culture-obsessed geek. An agoraphobic shut-in, with no real friends, family, or genuine human contact. I was just another sad, lost, lonely soul, wasting his life on a glorified videogame.

But not in the OASIS. In there, I was the great Parzival. World-famous [video game player] and international celebrity. People asked for my autograph. I had a fan club.

While Wade contemplates achieving real fame, just being the best gamer in your peer group or within your online gaming community can be enormously motivating. It can let you be great in one part of your life, even when you are falling behind in others.

For Wade, the biggest source of happiness related to video games is that they help him find an end to his isolation, and this is where Cline presents his strongest admonitions. Within the book, the lives of Wade and Halliday, the creator of the OASIS, are often explicitly paralleled, particularly in their relationships. Wade is an orphan while Halliday is neglected and misunderstood by his parents. Neither is very successful in forming successful relationships in the real world, and they are both deeply lonely. Most importantly, both of them have two primary relationships: a close friend and a love interest, both of which they find through a shared interest in video games. It's in the characters' different handling of these relationships that Cline presents his warning.

The first description of these relationships comes from a passage discussing Halliday in his teenage years. In junior high, Halliday was fascinated by Dungeons & Dragons, though he did not have friends to play the game. In time, a classmate invited Halliday to attend one of the weekly D&D gaming sessions at his house where Halliday "was introduced to an entire group of 'mega geeks' just like himself. They immediately accepted him as one of their own, and for the first time in his life, James Halliday had a circle of friends."

While D&D is not a video but a "physical" game, this anecdote from Halliday's life does highlight the social potential of games. Video games can provide a shared activity with associated built-in social norms that can make socializing easier, especially for those that struggle to find a place. This can be as simple as two people enjoying the same game and playing competitively, mimicking chess players of the past. As often as not, though, today's video games are explicitly social with features that share much in common with social networks. Sometimes the social aspect is secondary to the gameplay, such as online services that match players that want to play games competitively, but often it is a key element, with players required to form teams, for a single game or, sometimes, for months or years.

For those outside who do not play video games, it's tempting to dismiss these interactions. But this is, I believe, a mistake. It's possible to form real and lasting relationships online and through video games. These relationships can have depth and power. Most importantly, for some, these relationships can be the only opportunity that they have, or feel like they have, to find friendship.

The question becomes, however, whether these online interactions are enough. While they may be real relationships, are they able to provide enough true intimacy to feed our desires for closeness and community? Cline explores this extensively through Wade's two closest relationships: his friend Aech and his love interest Art3mis. Take this online chat between Art3mis and Wade (using his online name Parzival):

Art3mis: But you still don't really know anything about me. Or my real personality.

Parzival: This is the OASIS. We exist as nothing but raw personality in here.

Art3mis: I beg to differ. Everything about our online personas is filtered through our avatars, which allows us to control how we look and sound to others. The OASIS lets you be whoever you want to be. That's why everyone is addicted to it.

Parzival: So, IRL [in real life], you're nothing like the person I met that night in the tomb?

Art3mis: That was just one side of me. The side I chose to show you.

This notion that online interactions allow us to control how we present ourselves is a key theme to the book. Both Aech and Art3mis turn out to be very different from how they present themselves within the OASIS. Eventually, Wade is forced to meet both characters in reality and, subsequently, they must all accept a loss of control over their self-presentation.

What's especially interesting is that Cline makes no attempt to argue that online interactions are superior to in-person interactions at a fundamental level. Quite the opposite. As characters meet in person, they are forced to be more vulnerable, genuine, and open. Their physical meeting deepens their relationships. The loss of control and forced exposure of more of their real selves is presented as completely positive.

The vulnerability that comes from leaving the confines of the in-game interactions is ultimately what differentiates Wade and Halliday. Halliday is never able to pursue his love interest, because he never gains the courage to build a friendship beyond their shared gaming. He never even addresses her by her real name, preferring to use the name of her in-game character. Eventually, she marries his friend and the pain of this loss causes him to withdraw from both of them and, eventually, all relationships into the online world that he created.

He does come to regret this withdrawal, however. At the climax of the book, a simulated version of Halliday offers Wade some advice as he hands over full control of the OASIS to him:

"Listen," he [Halliday] said, adopting a confidential tone. "I need to tell you one last thing before I go. Something I didn't figure out for myself until it was already too late...." "I created the OASIS because I never felt at home in the real world. I didn't know how to connect with the people there. I was afraid, for all of my life. Right up until I knew it was ending. That was when I realized, as terrifying and painful as reality can be, it's also the only place where you can find true happiness. Because reality is real. Do you understand?"

In the book, Wade takes this advice to heart and pursues his relationships with Aech and Art3mis outside of the OASIS. He confronts his fears, makes himself vulnerable, and begins to find happiness in reality. Hopefully some of the millions that are trapped in video games today can do the same.

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