

Insert Coin, Grab Joystick and Buckle up – Memories and Takeaways from Ready Player One,
by Ernest Cline

The world created by Ernest Cline in his novel sounded like a utopia to me. Being a lover of video games, all things vintage and Sci-Fi, the book struck every single geeky nerve in my body. References to '80s pop culture, movies I watched as a youngster and games I played (and some I still play to this day) were sprawled all over its pages. I stumbled across the book while browsing the “featured” section of my school’s library. After the first chapter, I was hooked, and drank in the sentences till paragraphs blurred into chapters and long afternoons shifted seamlessly into nights. I read the book every waking moment I had: on my commutes, during my mealtimes and even while out with my friends.

The world I entered during these sessions was a virtual reality world known as the “Oasis”, where anyone could log in, create their avatar, and live the life of their dreams. Highly-skilled players were rewarded with fame, glory, and fortune, a concept that seemed so desirable, yet so alien to the reality in which I had to live. Confined by responsibilities, burdened by daily stresses, and pressured by expectations, I sought escape through my game consoles. I would spend the better half of my day absorbed by Master Chief the super soldier, Link on his adventures and Megaman with his blaster (while being berated by my elders of course) and I only studied to ensure my parents would have no reason to confiscate my electronics.

Cline’s narrative begins when the creator of the Oasis passes on and leaves behind a quest with the ultimate reward: control over the simulation. The protagonist, Wade Watts, dedicates his life towards completing this challenge. Watts is your average teenager, who lives a relatively mundane life having to attend school and complete his chores. But once he portals into the Oasis, he transforms into the famed knight: Parzival. Quickly overcoming the first step in the quest, Parzival becomes a celebrity and is lavished with riches, becoming the envy of the world. Wade’s virtual self thus becomes a galaxy apart from his invisible, real self. Through a combination of wit, luck and some help from his friends, Parzival eventually completes his journey, and in doing so, became a beacon for my aspirations.

At the time of writing this story, there is still no character in my life that I resonate with more than Wade Watts. I yearned to be teleported into the novel, to undertake the challenges and become a legend, but more than anything I wanted to live in a world where playing games and watching movies would not be met with derogatory terms such as “nerd,” “loser” or “useless”.

But there were other lessons - earthly lessons - that fell from the pages. For one thing, I realised that just like Parzival, I could never do it all alone. I began to surround myself with people that were supportive of my hobbies and could relate to my interests, and have carried that philosophy with me ever since, telling myself that not everyone is going to accept me, but what is imperative is that I have people around me that do. I need not be a hero for the world, but I can be one for those that matter.

Another thing I learnt from the novel was that it's not always possible or beneficial to always be put into a trance-like state by games. Parzival, at the end his day of slaying monsters, dungeon exploring and treasure hunting, had to forget his power and return to being Wade Watts. Games are ultimately an escape from life and a stimulant to avoid the mundane. One must be aware of the borders between reality and fantasy. I have a duty to throw myself into my studies and eventually embark upon a career to support my family. But I will endeavour to enter a profession that allows me to express my creativity and achieve success. After all, why do anything if you are not aiming to be top of the scoreboard. In doing so, I will give a nod to the dreams and joys of the excited little boy of my youth, whiling away the hours, controller in hand and monitor reflected in my eyes.

But hey, if you know a way into the Oasis, do drop me a line.

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