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LIMINALITY OF HYPERREALITY IN ERNEST CLINE'S *READY PLAYER ONE*

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Abstract

In the era of technological advancements like Artificial Intelligence and Virtual Reality, humans are often faced with the conundrum of immersing themselves into such mediums as an escape from their harsh reality. Their virtual identity is so profound that it results in the blurred borders of reality. Hyperreality, introduced by Jean Baudrillard, is the inability of a human to distinguish reality from the stimulations of reality. *Ready Player One* is a dystopian science fiction novel which centers on a virtual reality game, OASIS. Set in the 2040s, the narrative showcases the lives of the people who are immersed into the OASIS with virtual reality stimulators and haptic technological devices. The paper aims to trace the disintegration of the boundary between reality and virtuality which leads to the protagonist's liminality in the state of hyperreality with reference to Ernest Cline's novel, *Ready Player One*.

Keywords: hyperreality, liminality, virtual reality, stimulation, simulacrum

The world in its postmodern era underwent a technological upgradation and in 2023, it is being powered by artificial intelligence in various vistas. Metaverse and augmented reality are soon claimed to take over the world. This shift towards a virtual realm has put people in a conundrum of immersing themselves in the virtual platforms to escape the cynical reality. The Covid lockdown catalysed this transition as all the countries were forced to present themselves online. This demand resulted in the mushrooming of users in the social media platforms, exploring the infinite possibilities of the virtual world. People adapted and interacted on platforms such as Zoom, G-Meet, Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, online gaming and streaming sites with better ease. This fluid socialisation of the people in the simulated world is a characteristic trait of the

postmodern world of fragmentation. The postmodern human is self-conscious and self-undermining as a result of the distorted reality. Thus, the individual seeks acknowledgment and involvement in a cordial community which can be easily customised by the hypermarkets of the technological world.

The conception of reality is thus negated and its plurality is acknowledged by the postmodern humans. This replacement of reality with representations has promoted the world from the era of production to the era of simulation, as highlighted by Baudrillard. Jean Baudrillard, a French sociologist, philosopher and cultural theorist, opines that postmodernism has created a world of 'hyperreality' where the people no longer are willing to believe in reality. They rather believe in

simulations procreated by the technical advancements. The plight of reality in the postmodern world has therefore become debatable. Posthumanism labels this as an enhanced world where humans evolve beyond the conventional social boundaries with the aid of the technological advancements. The real no longer exists and the hyperreal world is a simulacrum where the real cannot be distinguished from the unreal.

Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality is reflected in various postmodern literary works. Ernest Cline, in his novel, *Ready Player One*, brings in the virtual reality MMORPG (Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game) game called, OASIS and sets the plot in a dystopian future with immersive technology. The objective of the paper is to trace the disintegration of the boundary between reality and virtuality which leads to the protagonist's liminality in the state of hyperreality with reference to Ernest Cline's novel, *Ready Player One*. The study will bring out the elements of hyperreality that surface in the narrative and also analyse the liminal space occupied by the characters in their digital world called OASIS.

Ernest Cline is an American novelist, slam poet and screenplay writer who specializes in the genre of science fiction. He confesses that his addiction to video games and movies as a young boy is a major contributory factor to his literary creativity. His first novel *Ready Player One* was published in 2011 and was adopted into a film, co-written by him and directed by Steven Spielberg in 2018. His other novels include *Armada* and *Ready Player Two* which were published in 2015 and 2020 respectively. *The Importance of Being Ernest* is his slam poetry collection which was published in 2013. He co-wrote the screenplay for the movie *Fanboys*, along with Adam Goldberg, which was released in 2009.

The following literary research works have been reviewed for the discourse of this study: Ozlem Onal's critical work titled "An Analysis of Hyperreality in John Fowles' *The Magus* and Paul Auster's *Moon Palace*" by The Middle East Technical University, Turkey in 2019; Zenida Rihadasri's work titled "Logging away from Reality: Hyperreality in

Ready Player One" in Universitas Airlangga, Indonesia 2020; and "The Portrayal And The Effects Of Hyperreality In *Ready Player One* Movie By Steven Spielberg (The Application Of Jean Baudrillard's Theory)" by Sarniyati Dalimu, Ansor Putra and Rahmawati Azi of Universitas Halu Oleo, Indonesia published in 2020. The literary reviews confirm that the topic of the study stands unique in the pioneering of exploring the concept of liminality in the select novel by Ernest Cline.

Ready Player One is a dystopian science fiction novel set in 2045 in Ohio, America. Wade Watts is the protagonist of the novel who, after the death of his parents, has been living with his aunt in the poverty-stricken 'stacks' colony in trailer homes. Being an avid gamer, he escapes his harsh reality by immersing in the virtual game of OASIS which is the brainchild of the popular figure in the gaming world, James Halliday along with his friend, Ogden Morrow. Sporting the gaming avatar named Parzival, Wade loves OASIS and fervently reads the works of Halliday. When Halliday announces that the OASIS will be passed on to the player who finds three Easter eggs hidden inside the game, Parzival is determined to find them. However, the intervention of IOI, a multinational corporation which aims to acquire OASIS and monetise it, triggers Wade to win the competition along with his clan, the High 5, consisting of Samantha Cook (*Art3mis*), Helen Harris (*Aech*), Toshiro (*Shoto*) and Akihide (*Daito*).

The clan takes up various missions to find the Easter eggs. They also combat the IOI players who try to bring them down. When Wade realises the ulterior motive of IOI, he rejects their offer to join their company. IOI finds out the real name and location of Wade and blackmails him with his aunt's life. When Wade persists, the IOI kills his aunt, his only family. Angered and taken aback with this violent act, Wade flees Ohio and is taken in by his girlfriend, Samantha, who he knows through OASIS as Art3mis. She says that IOI had killed her father too because he couldn't pay them back. She also enlightens Wade about the rebellion that is happening against IOI by its victims. They plan to defeat IOI and calls in all the players for support. In the final battle, with the help of the curator's help, the clan defeats IOI, and Wade (Parzival) obtains all

the three Easter eggs. Ogden Morrow, who was under the pretense of the curator, hands over the rights of OASIS to Wade. He decides to own the MMPORG along with his clan. The agents of IOI are arrested and the five friends bring back the happy and fun-filled OASIS as dreamt by Halliday.

Hyperreality could be defined as the inability of the mind to distinguish between the real and the simulation, which has no real origin or source. Baudrillard proclaims that this generation is an age of simulation because the consumption of products happens even if the product is not real. In case of social media platforms like Instagram, the content available is curated to something which is unrealistic and ideal. This simulation is projected and people view and believe the content as if it were real. The virtual world is a territory which does not exist yet people desperately want to be a part of. It just generates models based on reality and there is no origin or existence to such a world. This is what Baudrillard states as “the desert of the real itself (1).” Such an imagined representation has impelled the world into an era of simulation. With reference to the novel *Ready Player One*, Wade Watts, the

protagonist, along with his friends, is in a hyperreal world stipulated by OASIS. The haptic devices assist the users to get an almost realistic experience of the virtual realistic game. The economically unjust real world gives them all the more reasons to prioritize the hyperreal world. They find the simulation as a means of escaping the harsh reality. Wade has invested a lot of time in OASIS that he knows almost all the tricks and tactics of the extensive game.

Baudrillard in his book *Simulacrum and Simulacra* underlines that, in this technological world, image has undergone a transition as there is no longer a distinction between real and representation. He adds that such an image undergoes four successive phases of transition as represented in figure 1.

Such would be the successive phases of the image:

- it is the reflection of a profound reality;
- it masks and denatures a profound reality;
- it masks the absence of a profound reality;
- it has no relation to any reality whatsoever;
- it is its own pure simulacrum. (6)



Figure 1: Baudrillard’s phases of an image

The novel showcases the last phase of the image, a simulacrum which has no traits of reality. OASIS is a Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) which grants its users ultimate freedom to be whatever they want. It gives them superhuman abilities and their avatars are customised as transhumans with limitless powers. The typical standards of the real world are invalid in the game. All genres of human interests are catered by the customisation of the game according to the user. Parzival, the protagonist, in his narration, shares the reason for his obsession with OASIS as - “This is the OASIS. It’s a place where the limits of reality are our own imagination (4).”

According to Baudrillard, there are three types of simulacra that are projected in science fiction novels:

Three orders of simulacra: simulacra that are natural, naturalist, founded on the image, on imitation and counterfeit, that are harmonious, optimistic, and that aim for the restitution or the ideal institution of nature made in God's image; simulacra that are productive, productivist, founded on energy, force, its materialization by the machine and in the whole system of production – a Promethean aim of a continuous globalization and expansion, of an indefinite liberation of energy (desire belongs to the Utopias related to this order of simulacra); simulacra of simulation, founded on information, the model, the cybernetic game - total operationality, hyperreality, aim of total control. (118)

Among the three, Cline's *Ready Player One* belongs to the third type of simulacra. OASIS is a simulation game which is accessed by the users through haptic instruments and virtual reality. The game design is customised to provide total control to the users. The information that are hidden as Easter eggs provide ultimate power to the users who find them. Such a type of simulation which is founded on imagination with no specific reality is OASIS. As explained by Parzival, "People come to the OASIS for all the things they can do. But they stay because of all the things they can be (6)."

Hypermarket is a concept introduced by Baudrillard which refers to a completely delimited functional urban zoning where the objects have no specific reality. Cline builds OASIS as a futuristic hypermarket where the characters are unconscious and enthusiastic consumers who disregard reality to engage in hyperreality. Their holistic senses are captivated by the target-centric hypermarket and they dedicate their very real lives to the unreal world of OASIS just because there are no limits to imagination as found in the real world. As Parzival truthfully mentions, "OASIS is the only place where it feels like I mean anything (224)." Cline predict the future to be filled with devoted generation of mere models like OASIS existing without origin or reality, just as professed by Baudrillard.

However, in such a conundrum between the real and the unreal, the humans are caught struggling for authentic recognition and pure socialization despite their awareness of the simulations. This is the critical point where they experience liminality. Oxford dictionary defines 'liminality' as "the phase between or belonging to two different places or states." In Cline's novel, though all the five members of the High5 clan enjoy the limitless powers of OASIS, they are pushed into a liminal space in various junctures throughout the plot. When IOI threatens Wade of attacking his gaming stack, he realizes that he is not invincible like his gaming avatar, Parzival. The characters understand that their only drawback in the revolt against IOI is that OASIS is not real. In the later part of the novel when Parzival shares his real name with Art3mis, she says "You don't tell anyone who you are. You can't tell your real name. Because this isn't

just a game. It is life or death (179)." This dire situation of life or death shoves the characters into the liminal space where they are torn between the allure of the limitless simulation and the repulsive yet indispensable reality. Towards of the falling action of the plot, Wade decides to take over OASIS along with his High 5 clan. Having been a victim of liminality, he declares that OASIS will be shut down every Tuesdays and Thursdays so that people could experience the real world. He substantiates his decision by quoting Halliday, "Reality is the only thing that is real (296)."

This study with reference to Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* proves that the corrosion of the boundary between reality and virtuality blurs the individual's sense of the real, thus inducing liminality in the state of hyperreality.

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