Exploring Dimensions of Cyberspace and Unpacking Psychological Entanglement in Cline's Ready Player One: A Cyber Psychological Analysis

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Abstract

This research article examines Ernest Cline's Ready Player One to explore various dimensions of cyberspace, named the OASIS. The purpose of this study is to get insights into how cyberspace has evolved patterns of human psychology. Owing to this, different aspects of cyberspace, including identity construction, techno-human interactive mechanisms, synchronous and asynchronous temporal patterns, and the evolving contours of reality, physical, and sensory dimensions, have been explored. The study has employed John Suler's eight-dimensional model of cyberspace fabrication. Suler's multifaceted theoretical contemplation provides a solid foundation for approaching and exploring human experiences in cyberspace. The first dimension of the model addresses the dimension of identity in cyberspace, giving insight into how people present themselves in the online realm, adapting their persona according to their aspirations using various digital tools, and finding a refuge for their complexes. The analysis illustrates how OASIS users merge the shards of their actual selves with their desired selves to create their digital profile. Insights into the interactive dimension reveal how layers of manipulation shift from providing a sense of agency, control, purpose, and accomplishment to rendering an individual a pawn in the hands of technology. The virtual illusion makes them feel that they can co-create or solely create their experiences, exercise control over their lives, and the events around them. This sense of power further traps immersed individuals into the illusion of cyberspace, as they start to substitute click-oriented power with a sense of autonomy. The analysis reveals how temporal patterns in cyberspace create an illusion of timelessness, making OASIS users believe they can transcend the limits of time while remaining within the virtual realm. The study further explores how hyper-immersion and the increasing appeal of the virtual blur the boundaries between the real and unreal, making individuals perceive the virtual as something more authentic than the real. While exploring all the elements, the study focused on unpacking the psychological complexities that cyberspace causes, showing how human pursuits of escaping the dystopia of the physical world pave the path for another version of the same. The one that is more complex than the previous one.

Keywords: Cyberspace, Cyberspace fabrication, Ernest Cline, Cyberpsychology, Identity, Psychological entanglement, OASIS

Introduction

In the era of technological development, the increasing immersion of human beings into cyberspace has led to evolving patterns in human psychology (Aiken, 2019). Ernest Cline's Ready Player One

is set in a futuristic, techno-dystopian society, providing a rich landscape for exploring the impact of technology on human psychology. The present study examines the construction of cyberspace as an alluring realm by investigating its dimensions, including identity, time, human physicality, the contestation between the real and the virtual, and techno-human interaction within cyberspace. For that purpose, the study has adopted John Suler's model of cyberspace architecture. Exploration of the mentioned dimensions highlights the psychological entanglement caused by unchecked techno-human convergence.

Literature Review

The novel explores a range of complex themes, including education, the journey toward adulthood, the evolution of religious beliefs in the post-human era, environmental crisis, and the narrative techniques employed by the author. The rich trajectory of thematic concerns has sparked the interest of researchers to explore the novel from various perspectives. One such attempt examined the text to explore the virtual means of education, focusing on the concepts of the virtual school system mentioned in the novel, as described in Ludus (Osvath, 2018). The study acknowledged Cline's innovative ideas of virtual education and concluded that they were an effective effort to initiate new possibilities for learning. Another research explored Cine's narrative world, focusing on the young adult character navigating their way towards adulthood through the theoretical contemplations of Carl Jung's character archetypes (Lesari, 2021). Wicaksono (2020) approached the novel as a coming-of-age journey through the theoretical concept of the monomyth, as proposed by Campbell, reflecting upon the journey of Wade Watts as a heroic transformation from nothing to achieving everything (Wicaksono, 2020). Another scholar considered Cline's Ready Player One a compelling commentary on the potential of technology to be both positive and negative (Yao Yu-xin, 2023). Seegert (2014) considers the narrative world of the novel as an individual's nostalgic lamentation for the past. In contrast, Anderson (2018) argues that the novel is an attempt to envision a society that encompasses all, providing equal rights and treatment to LGBTQ individuals. Focusing on Cline's religious and ethical contemplations in the novel, another researcher examined the novel as an attempt to explore scientific means of transcendentalism, as an alternative to the technological version of the divine (Pimentel, 2021). Following a similar research interest, another researcher explored the novel as a fragmentary commentary on the evolving patterns of post-human religion (Monteith, 2022). Endorsing this perspective, another research attempt further explored the moral considerations of the characters, which are manifested as justice, honesty, compassion, charity, and accountability (Ginting, 2021). Following the religious and moral grounds of the narrative, another scholar has connected these religious blocks to medieval times and comprehended Wade Watts' attempts to find Halliday's egg as a manifestation of searching for the Holy Grail (Aronstein & Thompson, 2015). Following the dichotomy of a gamified and destroyed real world, Nordstrom asserts that the novel is an amalgamation of utopian and dystopian manifestations of life Zaman, Buriro, and Chandio, (2025). Focusing solely on the utopian world within the novel and human aspirations related to that world, a research attempt connected the utopian perspective to the demonstration of the American Dream (Steiner, 2024). Considering the dystopian representation of the world, a research scholar reflected on the scenario of poverty, disease, and a war-stricken society, compared it with the previous apocalyptic phases of history, and categorized Cline's Ready Player One as post-apocalyptic literature (Saatsi, 2018). The destructive picture of the world painted by Cline further stimulated researchers' interest in investigating environmental degradation (Choudaraju, 2020). The novel has been explored from various perspectives, but the irresistible and psychologically numbing realm of cyberspace is yet to be explored. The present study aims to fill that gap by exploring the architecture of cyberspace, providing insights into its various dimensions.

Research Methodology

The present study has framed the selected novel within the theoretical lens of John Suler's Eight-

dimensional model that focuses on the fabrication of cyberspace. The model offers theoretical considerations for examining how a technology-generated realm functions, appeals to humans, and how individuals navigate their way within the virtual realm while coping with its complexity and appeal (Suler, 2016). The model has been divided into the following dimensions: identity, interactive, interpersonal, temporal, human physicality, reality, and sensory (Suler, 2016).

Multi-dimensional Fabrication of Cyberspace and Psychological Evolution
Cline's Ready Player One offers a rich narrative landscape for exploring cyberspace as a psychological trap. Cyberspace is introduced as the OASIS, a meticulously developed virtual world in the novel. The exploration of the OASIS reveals how various dimensions of cyberspace work in complicity to increase the allure of the virtual realm, convince people to prioritize the online world over the physical world, and cause substantial psychological complications. All the dimensions of cyberspace contribute to the psychological entanglement of the digital citizen. The exploration of the dimension of identity reveals how available features of identity development in cyberspace allow individuals to amalgamate their original identities with that of their aspired sense of self, thereby finding a refuge to calm their inferiority complexes. In the OASIS, people try to materialize their imagined sense of self and freely modulate their avatars as per their desires in an attempt to materialize their idealized selves. It is evident in the way Wade Watts designs his online avatar by covering up the complexes related to his physical appearance. In real life, Watts feels an inferiority complex because of his obesity, pimpled face, and humble attire. He designs his digital avatar as a manifestation of an identity that overcomes all those problems, as he states, "My avatar had a slightly smaller nose than me, and he was taller. And thinner. And more muscular. And he didn't have any teenage acne" (Cline, 2011, p.28). He feels a sense of relief and satisfaction to have his idealized version of identity as his digital avatar. That also makes him feel that cyberspace has a solution for all of his problems. The irresistible lure of the psychological realm frames him to neglect the fact that his attractive digital avatar is just an illusion, and it has nothing to do with his real appearance. Here, this psychological entanglement manifests a sort of dissociation, as the digitalized version of identity dissociates authentic identity and persona from human consciousness and replaces it with an illusory sense of self. The interactive dimension focuses on how individuals navigate their way inside the online space while interacting with technology. The interaction between individuals and technology in the tricky void of cyberspace further causes psychological complications. It is apparent in the way OASIS gives an illusory sense of autonomy and agency to its users. The OASIS users feel an ultimate sense of autonomy and agency as they freely construct their identities, make commands to change their surroundings as per their desires, and win games to boast their power. The click-mediated command and the resulting customized results lead cyber users into a delusional state of mind, where they believe they are the sole creators of their experiences and possess the power to navigate their lives. Their numbed state of delusion prevents them from realizing that they are not the ones exercising power and agency. Their delusional psychology seems to be numb to the fact that the programmed world of technology is exercising power and ruling over their psyche. The sensory dimension of OASIS further embellishes the psychological appeal of cyberspace by allowing its users to see, touch, and feel an illusory bubble world as real. The pair of virtual glasses and haptic suit makes cyberspace appear as real. Wade Watts reflects upon the sensory appeal of the OASIS by stating, "When you picked up objects, opened doors, or operated vehicles, the haptic gloves made you feel these nonexistent objects and surfaces as if they were really right there in front of you" (Cline, 2011, p. 58). The sensory attraction of the OASIS extends beyond mere sight, touch, and approach to the online world, making it feel real. It also incites sexual desires in its users. It is evident in the case how Wade Watts feels when he sees Art3mis and develops the urge to kiss her. When their digital avatars kiss, Wade Watts feels his heart racing with sensations. He reflects upon the moment, stating, "she leaned over and kissed me for the first time. I couldn't feel it, of course. But it still set my heart racing" (Cline, 2011, p.179). Additionally, the advanced sensory features of the

OASIS, in the form of simulated games, also allow users to experience the life of their favorite movie characters by getting right under the skin of those characters, saying their dialogue, and performing their lines of action. Such types of simulated games appear to be another way of materializing one's imagination into reality. Wade Watts describes his excitement to live the life of his favorite character, David, with his voice, dialogues, and actions surrounded by all the characters of WarGames as a "giddy" and "incredible" experience (Cline, 2011, p.110). All these tactile features of the OASIS and simulated experiences blur the boundaries between illusion and reality, further solidifying human psychology's belief in the virtual world as the ultimate reality. This psychological confusion blurs the lines between the OASIS and the real world, and human beings become increasingly immersed in cyberspace. The collapse of these boundaries causes OASIS users to undergo the cyber version of reality. It is evident in the way Wade Watts rejects the body of knowledge provided to him by society in the real world by considering it a product of fiction and "nonsense" of the ignorant era (Cline, 2011, p.16). His rejection of the presence of god, Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, and the concept of life after death in hell or heaven demonstrates his rejection of the ontological grounds of the physical world. In place of that, he willingly consumes the programmed ontological beliefs offered by the OASIS as the ultimate real. In the light of cyber epistemology, he reimagined his identity as per that discourse as a "smart kind of animal" that has evolved from a unicellular body over time (Cline, 2011, p.16). The irresistible allure of cyberspace, Watts' unchecked immersion in the OASIS, and the resulting psychological disruption dismantle his whole belief system, reducing him to a numb-headed person who can no longer differentiate between fact and fabricated discourse. The social dimension of the OASIS further takes this amplified state of psychological confusion to another stage by providing individuals with the options to customize their social interaction in cyberspace. The luxury of selecting one's social group and excluding unwanted people from the surroundings firstly reinforces the false sense of autonomy in the OASIS users. They feel empowered to easily remove and add people to their surroundings. Secondly, this luring feature of cyberspace causes a disintegration in the social pattern. The users start to prioritize their tailored social ties in the OASIS over their real-life relations. It is seen in the case of Wade Watts and Aech, who isolate themselves from the outer world and become dependent on the cyber relations. Thirdly, as the features of the social dimension combine with dissociative anonymity, users start to behave differently, giving their inner frustration a way out in the form of abusive behavior. It is apparent in the way Wade Watts responds to a boy in Ludus who comments on the attire of his avatar. He says to the boy that her mother bought him these clothes and asks him to say thanks to his mother when he goes home "to breast-feed and pick up" his "allowance" (Cline, 2011, p.30). Afterward, he mutes the boy before he says anything that further adds to his joy to see the boy helpless to respond to his abusive response. He states, "The best thing about it was that they could see that you'd muted them, and they couldn't do a damn thing about it" (Cline, 2011, p.30). The incident illustrates how the cyber realm enables users to transition from victims to perpetrators. Wade Watts takes a while to use the features of cyberspace to take his bully down, by taking the place of a bully and responding to the boy in a more abusive way. Here, his dissociative anonymity and option to mute the boy make him free from the concern of thinking about the consequences of his actions in both the real and virtual world. So, he does not hesitate to say and do something that he would not do in the real world. This aspect illustrates another psychological implication of cyber immersion that Suler defines as cyber pathology. The textual dimension of the OASIS shows how face-to-face communication patterns transform into textual conversation. In Ready Player One, the pattern of textual conversation is even more passive, as the OASIS user keeps themselves occupied with the exploration of fantasy books and archived texts to look for the traces of Halliday's egg. They prioritize indirect textual communication with the deceased person, James Halliday, over real-world communication by seeking out the traces he left in various books and archives. The fabrication of the system does not make them realize the abnormality of their behavior by reading a book a hundred times to the extent of learning its content by heart, while putting their communication with the people behind. The temporal dimension of the OASIS

creates a sense of timelessness inside its world. The synchronous and asynchronous temporal patterns lead users to develop the illusion that they can transcend boundaries of time in the OASIS. In some cases, the temporal distortion also creates the illusion of immortality. This happens in the case of James Halliday, who manipulates the temporal patterns, aligns his death news with that of a simulated video to address the OASIS users for the announcement of a quest, and creates an impression as if he is communicating with the people even after his death. Additionally, the absence of temporal indicators of day and night in the OASIS causes its users to lose track of time while immersed in it. It is apparent in Wade Watts' twenty-four-hour-long immersion in the OASIS when he completes the first phase of Halliday's quest. The illusion of timelessness and losing track of time in cyberspace further leads the analysis toward the physical dimension that highlights the effects of obsessive immersion on the human physical body. The novel portrays cyber-immersed individuals in a confused psychological state, unable to distinguish between the virtual and real world, which leads them to neglect their physical body's needs. During full day and night immersion in the OASIS, Wade Watts forgets that he is inside his hideout under a pile of cars, in freezing temperatures. It is only after the moment when he signs out of his OASIS account and takes out his visor and rubs his "bloodshot eyes" that he feels his terrible physical state (Cline, 2011, p.114). By the end of the novel, when he obsessively subjects himself to cyber immersion to complete the last phase of Halliday's quest, he isolates himself in a small apartment. He removes all of his hair as he finds it a barrier to fit into his haptic suit, and considers it a waste of time to maintain his hygiene by cleaning his hair. Wade Watts's obsessive cyber immersion and troubled psyche make him reduce his physical body to a dehumanized apparatus to connect to the OASIS.

Conclusion

The exploration of Cline's Ready Player One, employing Suler's eight-dimensional model, provides critical insights into the evolution of human psychology, developing new patterns in the shadow of technology. Cline's narrative construction of a dystopian society, transitioning into a fabricated realm, offers a rich tapestry to explore various dimensions of cyberspace. The analysis of the dimension of identity highlighted a fluid construction of identity in cyberspace that has reduced individuals' profiles to an obsessive manifestation of their hidden desires and aspirations. It has demonstrated how various features of cyberspace provide a refuge for human complexities related to physical appearance, social status, deprivation of basic needs, and gender, thereby paving the way for even greater complexities. The complexities of manipulating individuals' cognitive faculties and drawing them towards a state of amputation. The exploration of the interactive dimension reveals how individuals develop an illusory sense of autonomy and empowerment as they manage to control various functions using commands and features provided in cyberspace. The temporal dimension offers insights into how synchronous and asynchronous patterns have transcended the boundaries of time in the real world, creating an illusion of timelessness. The study of the sensory dimension reveals how cyberspace manipulates human senses, such as touch, sight, and hearing, and makes them perceive the virtual as real. The exploration has also taken the sensory appeal into account to reveal how it sets the patterns for cyber romance. The dimension of reality highlights the ways cyberspace provides itself as a substitute for the real, questioning and creating ambiguity regarding the pillars of knowledge, such as the existence of god, and life after death. It presents its fabricated epistemological grounds and convinces individuals of their authenticity. By examining the physical aspects of cyberspace, the analysis has revealed how immersion in cyberspace can lead to neglect of bodily needs and reduction of human existence to a dehumanized apparatus to connect with the digital world. While exploring all the elements, the study focused on unpacking the psychological complexities that cyberspace causes, showing how human pursuits of escaping the dystopia of the physical world pave the path for another version of the same. The one that is more complex than the previous one.

Important Note: This research paper is an adapted and expanded version of one of the chapters from my recently completed PhD thesis, yet to be defended at The University of Faisalabad. The chapter has been substantially revised and reframed to stand alone as a scholarly article for the readership of SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW ARCHIVES.

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