



To Immerse is to Escape: Analyzing the Power of Simulacra and Simulation in Ernest Cline's Ready Player One and Ready Player Two

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Abstract: In this study, we shall endeavor to analyze Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* (2011) and *Ready Player Two* (2020) to analyze the trope of virtual reality from primarily a Baudrillard's theory of 'Simulacra and Simulation'. This study aims to show how in a hyper-immersive virtual reality environment, all distinctions between reality and virtuality simply ebb away when a new paradigm shift occurs in the form of the triumph of the virtual over the real. In such a hyper-immersive virtual environment, the virtuality does not merely serve as an alternative mode of existence where one logs in to escapes from reality, rather it becomes the dominant shaping force that begins to mold the reality after its own pattern.

Keywords: Simulacra and Simulation; hyperreality, virtual reality, postmodern, science fiction

I. INTRODUCTION:

"It is possible that I am dreaming right now and that all of my perceptions are false," stated René Descartes in his famous Meditations. Similarly, Nick Bostrom in his "Are You Living in a Simulation?" (2003) argues that "If we are living in a simulation, then the cosmos that we are observing is just a tiny piece of the totality of physical existence... While the world we see is in some sense 'real,' it is not located at the fundamental level of reality." The theories which attempt to describe our reality range from scientific, philosophical to overly mystical. Reality may on one hand be defined as anything which we can perceive using our senses: touch, smell, taste, hearing and sight. However, as many thinkers, philosophers, and even scientists are hypothesizing at present, our entire reality might be merely a simulation constructed with extremely advanced computer. In stories and articles such as "Allegory of the Cave" in Plato's book "The Republic," and the evil demon hypothesis as found in René Descartes's "First Meditation," we find early ruminations and speculations on the nature of reality which can be thought of as based on an early version of simulation theory.

Simulation theory in its modern form hypothesizes that we all are part of an elaborate and advanced digital construct, such as a computer simulation, that has been constructed and is being continuously sustained by some advanced being with enormous computational power.

Rizwan Virk, a successful Silicon Valley entrepreneur and investor remarks, "Simply because we perceive the world as 'real' and 'material' doesn't mean that it is so. In fact, the findings of quantum physics may shed some doubt on the fact that the material universe is real. The more that scientists look for the "material" in the material world, the more they find that it doesn't exist." (qtd. in "What Is Simulation Theory"). Physicist John Archibald Wheeler once said, physics had evolved from the premise that "everything is a particle" to "everything is information," and Wheeler even coined a phrase that's quite popular in scientific circles: "It from bit" which basically means that information is more fundamental than anything else. Barzegar, Ali, et al. (2020) in their article "'It from Bit' and Quantum Mechanics", have tried to interpret and analyze Wheeler's idea of 'it from bit' in the context of Bohmian Mechanics and spontaneous collapse models. David Chalmers even hypothesizes that our universe may be a part of an even grander programmed reality that is being constructed by a simulator residing in a higher-level universe. Some programmer, Chalmers imagines, is perhaps busy "hacking on a computer and running five universes in the background... But it might be someone who is nonetheless omniscient, all-knowing and all-powerful about our world." Famous theoretical physicist David Bohm proposed this complex notion of

reality where our reality becomes nothing more than an extension of our perception: “Reality is what we take to be true. What we take to be true is what we believe. What we believe is based upon our perceptions. What we perceive depends on what we look for. What we look for depends on what we think. What we think depends on what we perceive. What we perceive determines what we believe. What we believe determines what we take to be true. What we take to be true is our reality.” James Glattfelder in his "The Consciousness Of Reality" (2019) proposes nine alternative explanations of existence among which ‘simulation hypothesis’ is one:

E1

It is all just one big coincidence and happened by pure chance. We know the fundamental laws of nature and consciousness is simply the result of how the brain works. There is no mystery and that is all there is to say. [Materialism, scientific realism]

E2

A God created the universe. Perhaps 13.8 billion years ago or perhaps 6,000 years ago with fictitious properties making the universe appear older (or even 5 seconds ago, with false memories implanted in all human minds) . [Creationism in Abrahamic religion]

E3

Reality is a vast and impermanent illusion (*anicca*) comprised of endless distractions and suffering. The quest of the mind is to cultivate a state of awareness, allowing the illusion to be seen for what it is. Then the enlightened mind can withdraw from the physical realm and enter a state of pure bliss. [Buddhism]

E4

Only the Self exists. Life is the endless play of the Self (*lila*) losing itself only to find itself again in a constant game of hide-and-seek. [Hinduism]

E5

Only pure consciousness exists. In endless cycles, it manifests itself as separate physical embodiments, allowing for an experiential context, only to merge in unity again and start afresh. [Spirituality, panpsychism]

E6

We are dreaming this life and will some day “wake up” to a richer reality which is unimaginably more lucid and coherent. Physical death marks the transition of consciousness from the dreaming state to a higher-dimensional reality or maybe a reality entirely outside the realm of space and time. [Esotericism variation]

E7

We live in the multiverse, the infinite set of all possible universes. As a consequence, we naturally find ourselves in that corner of it which allows for intelligent and sentient life. [String/M-theory, cosmology, many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics]

E8

Our physical three-dimensional universe is an illusion. It is a hologram that is isomorphic to the quantum information encoded on the surface of its boundary. [Holographic principle, AdS/CFT duality]

E9

We inhabit a simulation that has these features programmed [Simulation hypothesis]. (Glattfelder, "The Consciousness Of Reality").

Tech entrepreneur Elon Musk, feels that the odds that we are not simulated are somewhat “one in billions”. This implies that all of what we take for granted a part of our grand reality is merely the effect of simulated brains and simulated nervous systems that are processing information in a simulated world. Musk’s words also seem to apply to the world in which the action in Cline’s novels is set: “Forty years ago, we had Pong, two rectangles and a dot...That is what games were. Now, 40 years later, we have

photorealistic 3D simulations with millions of people playing simultaneously, and it's getting better every year. And soon we'll have virtual reality, augmented reality. If you assume any rate of improvement at all, the games will become indistinguishable from reality, even if that rate of advancement drops by a thousand from what it is now. Then you just say, okay, let's imagine it's 10,000 years in the future, which is nothing on the evolutionary scale. So given that we're clearly on a trajectory to have games that are indistinguishable from reality, and those games could be played on any set-top box or on a PC or whatever, and there would probably be billions of such computers or set-top boxes, it would seem to follow that the odds that we're in base reality is one in billions" ("Elon Musk Believes We Are Probably Characters in Some Advanced Civilization's Video Game"). Nick Bostrom similarly states, "One thing that later generations might do with their super-powerful computers is run detailed simulations of their forebears or of people like their forebears. Because their computers would be so powerful, they could run a great many such simulations. Suppose that these simulated people are conscious (as they would be if the simulations were sufficiently fine-grained and if a certain quite widely accepted position in the philosophy of mind is correct). Then it could be the case that the vast majority of minds like ours do not belong to the original race but rather to people simulated by the advanced descendants of an original race. It is then possible to argue that, if this were the case, we would be rational to think that we are likely among the simulated minds rather than among the original biological ones. Therefore, if we don't think that we are currently living in a computer simulation, we are not entitled to believe that we will have descendants who will run lots of such simulations of their forebears. That is the basic idea" (Bostrom, "Are We Living in a Computer Simulation?"). Bostrom's argument can be summarized in the following way:

"The fraction of human-level civilizations that reach a posthuman stage (that is, one capable of running high-fidelity ancestor simulations) is very close to zero," or

"The fraction of posthuman civilizations that are interested in running ancestor-simulations is very close to zero," or

"The fraction of all people with our kind of experiences that are living in a simulation is very close to one." (qtd. in Manzocco, *Transhumanism - Engineering the Human Condition* 283-84).

In his seminal 2003 paper titled "Are You Living in a Computer Simulation?", Nick Bostrom proposes that future generations might develop super-advanced computers which can construct and run a number of hyper-realistic "ancestor simulations" in which the simulated beings will also possess artificial consciousness. "Then it could be the case," Bostrom goes on to explain, "that the vast majority of minds like ours do not belong to the original race but rather to people simulated by the advanced descendants of an original race. It is then possible to argue that, if this were the case, we would be rational to think that we are likely among the simulated minds rather than among the original biological ones."

That type of "posthuman simulator," Bostrom also speculates that in order to run such a hyper-immersive simulation, one needs to store and run "the detailed believe-states in all human brains at all times." Why? In such a situation, the simulator should be able to predict the detailed brain states of all the entities embedded within the simulation so that it can effectively and flawlessly simulated the detailed simulacrum of each and every entity placed in the simulation. The simulator should "edit the states of any brains that have become aware of an anomaly before it spoils the simulation. Alternatively, the director could skip back a few seconds and rerun the simulation in a way that avoids the problem."

The question whether we live in a simulated universe has intrigued philosophers from the Enlightenment age down to our present age also as scientists, physicists and psychologists are still debating whether we live in some sort of hyper-immersive simulated world. Now, in order achieve such an immersive simulation, either we need to replicate human consciousness to such details so that we can create a conscious A.I., or we might alternatively find some new means to trick our consciousness into believing that we are in an actual reality been when we are in a video game where even non-playing characters will be endowed with a Turing complete intelligence.

Preston Greene, a philosophy professor at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, feels that the simulators of such immersive realities should possess enough capabilities with which they can effectively terminate an entire civilization and a vast range of phenomena with ease.

Greene states, “If our physicists use experiments to prove we live in a simulation, and they tell everyone about this and that has a large effect on how our civilization behaves, then our simulation would no longer be useful for answering questions about the basement [foundational] level of reality, which contains the computers doing the simulations. This is because such experimental proofs could never happen on the basement level. So even though there are many possibilities for how our simulators would react to our using experiments to prove we live in a simulation, simulation shutdown is worth taking at least as seriously as anything else, since it is supported by observed trends in simulation science.” “The real question”, U.K. astronomer Martin Rees feels should be, “what are the limits of computing powers.”

Cosmologist Paul Davies in an article titled “Reality In The Melting Pot” for The Guardian, wrote:

“Mathematicians have proved that a universal computing machine can create an artificial world that is itself capable of simulating its own world, and so on ad infinitum. In other words, simulations nest inside simulations inside simulations ... Because fake worlds can outnumber real ones without restriction, the “real” multiverse would inevitably spawn a vastly greater number of virtual multiverses. Indeed, there would be a limitless tower of virtual multiverses, leaving the “real” one swamped in a sea of fakes. So the bottom line is this. Once we go far enough down the multiverse route, all bets are off. Reality goes into the melting pot, and there is no reason to believe we are living in anything but a Matrix-style simulation. Science is then reduced to a charade, because the simulators of our world - whoever or whatever they are - can create any pseudo-laws they please, and keep changing them” (“Reality In The Melting Pot”).

Dan Falk in his article “Are We Living in a Simulated Universe?”, asks: “What if everything around us — the people, the stars overhead, the ground beneath our feet, even our bodies and minds — were an elaborate illusion? What if our world were simply a hyper-realistic simulation, with all of us merely characters in some kind of sophisticated video game?”

“If we are living in a simulation, then the cosmos that we are observing is just a tiny piece of the totality of physical existence,” Oxford philosopher Nick Bostrom said in a 2003 paper that jump-started the conversation about what has come to be known as the simulation hypothesis. “While the world we see is in some sense ‘real,’ it is not located at the fundamental level of reality.” Rizwan Virk, founder of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s PlayLabs program and author of *The Simulation Hypothesis*, feels that the day is not far when we will have difficulty in distinguishing the virtual reality from our physical reality.

Rich Terrile, a computer scientist at NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California, believes that that we will soon design conscious AIs with artificially replicated consciousness. In his words, “We are within a generation of being those gods who create those universes.” However, sceptics like Harvard University physicist Lisa Randall feels that the odds that the simulation hypothesis is correct are “effectively zero”.

Houman Owhadi, an expert on computational mathematics at the California Institute of Technology, believes that, “If the simulation has infinite computing power, there is no way you’re going to see that you’re living in a virtual reality, because it could compute whatever you want to the degree of realism you want.” Zohreh Davoudi, a physicist at the University of Maryland, has also expressed his belief that someday a simulation with finite computing resources could be discovered from the flaws or chinks in that simulation.

As Anil Ananthaswamy in his 2020 article for *Scientific American* beautifully describes: All of these factors have led Davoudi to speculate about the simulation hypothesis. If our reality is a simulation, then the simulator is likely also discretizing spacetime to save on computing resources (assuming, of course, that it is using the same mechanisms as our physicists for that simulation). Signatures of such discrete spacetime could potentially be seen in the directions high-energy cosmic rays arrive from: they would have a preferred direction in the sky because of the breaking of so-called rotational symmetry (“Do We Live in a Simulation? Chances Are about 50–50”).

Also, another aspect which we feel is worth considering before delving deep into the critique of these novels, is the longer-term ethical dimensions of these technologies such as sentient AIs and Brain Computer Interfaces. While ethical questions in the fields of ‘wet technology’ (such as gene editing, genome sequencing, abortion, and stem cell research) have been raised quite frequently, it is only very recently that such questions are beginning to be raised in such fields of ‘dry technology’ where machine and biological technology are increasingly being integrated. However, it is becoming increasingly clear to us, that the future will be virtual rather than real and it is of great importance that we begin to speculate

on the long-term consequences and implications of this virtual technology. Just as we rushed towards social media without being fully aware of its ramifications, the same might happen with virtual reality and in the latter case, the consequences will be more radical and paradigm-shifting. As Rizwan Virk opines: "But the reality is that the future may be virtual, and we are rushing towards that future just like we did with social networks without understanding the ramifications they could have on society until it was too late. If we don't start thinking about whether we should have full immersion, we may just end up in the virtual world" ("Ready Player Two: The Upcoming Escape to Virtual Realities").

A Brief Overview of Baudrillard's theory of 'Simulacrum and Simulacra': Now, as we shall be analyzing the novel mainly with the help of Baudrillard's theory of 'Simulacrum and Simulacra', it is of great importance that we analyze the details of Baudrillard's theory in some detail. Baudrillard's theory specifically mentions three "orders of simulacra": 1) in the first order of simulacra, the image can very well be recognized and identified as a clear counterfeit of the real; the image can be understood as merely an illusion, whose very existence depends on the nature of the 'real'; 2) in the second order of simulacra, the boundaries between the image and the representations begin getting blurred primarily as a result of mass production and the proliferation of copies. "Such production misrepresents and masks an underlying reality by imitating it so well, thus threatening to replace it (e.g. in photography or ideology); however, there is still a belief that, through critique or effective political action, one can still access the hidden fact of the real (from "Simulacrum | the Global Sixties," *Middlebury.edu*); 3) in the third order of simulacra, we see representation or the replication of the real begins to assume a more domain position than the real and starts determining the nature of the real itself. "There is no longer any distinction between reality and its representation; there is only the simulacrum" ("Introduction to Jean Baudrillard, Module on Simulacra and Simulation," *Purdue.edu*).

Baudrillard points to a number of phenomena to illustrate the loss of distinction between the physical and virtual reality:

1. Media culture- Contemporary media relay news and information to us by projecting our most private selves through imageries and thus compel us interpret these projections through media images. So, commercialized representations in various media such as television, film, magazines, billboards, the Internet now seem to form and shape our desires which keep us forever distanced from the actual reality.

2. Exchange-Value-In this stage, everything begins to be valued based on its worth, which in turn seems to be based on its exchange-value. In a scenario, where money becomes the "universal equivalent," against which everything in our lives is valued, material realities such as the labor of the laborers get lost. In a postmodern culture, Baudrillard, feels we have lost all sense of use-value, rather: "It is all capital" (*For a Critique* 82).

3. Multinational capitalism. Baudrillard observes that, as complex industrial processes become dominant, it is the capital that begins to define our identities for us. As a result, consumers in a capitalist system are unaware of the real-world qualities or material worth of the goods they consume.

4. Urbanization. Through the process of urbanization, the separation between nature and civilization becomes ever more obvious and the gap continues to widen between the natural world and the artificial world of consumerist, capitalist urban lifestyle.

5. Language and Ideology. Baudrillard also delves into ways in which language prevents us from perceiving the material nature of our "reality." The Marxist idea of "false consciousness" or the ideological disguises that previously used to hide the truth from us becomes in Baudrillard's formulation the second order of simulacra. "Because we are so reliant on language to structure our perceptions, any

representation of reality is always already ideological, always already constructed by simulacra” (“Introduction to Jean Baudrillard, Module on Simulacra and Simulation,” *Purdue.edu*).

Critique of *Ready Player One*: At first, we are going to analyze the novel *Ready Player One* (2011) by Ernest Cline. In this novel the central character is a body named Wade Owen Watts and his alter ego in simulated universe Parzival and the role of the fictional ‘novum’ is served by the simulacrum named OASIS (Ontologically Anthropocentric Sensory Immersive Simulation) which is a MMOSG or (massively multiplayer online simulation game) created by James Halliday and Ogden Morrow of Gregarious Simulation Systems (GSS), previously known as simply Gregarious Games. So, it is against this background of ‘novum’ that the action of the novel proceeds. The ‘cognitive estrangement’ in this novel is again provided by highly immersive simulation technologies which pervade the users all throughout the narrative from beginning to end. The OASIS also serves as the ultimate kind of mediatrix as originally envisioned by Taylor and Saarinen where the image of one’s simulated or projected self assumes the semblance of reality in front of millions of viewers. Coming back to our critique of the novel *Ready Player One*, we find that James Halliday, in the fictional world of ‘*Ready Player One*,’ ushers in the era of ultra-immersive and massively powerful simulated reality of OASIS and it thus becomes the Posthuman equivalent of Baudrillard’s Disneyland: “OASIS, a massively multiplayer online game that had gradually evolved into the globally networked virtual reality most of humanity now used on a daily basis” (Cline, *Ready Player One*, 1). Justin Nordstrom in his article titled “A Pleasant Place for the World to Hide” writes: “Ernest Cline’s 2011 novel *Ready Player One* offers an imaginary world that is simultaneously utopian and dystopian, because it portrays an immersive game-obsessed world that fuses high-tech virtual reality with 1980s nostalgia. Characters contrast their grim apocalyptic reality with escapism through worldwide gaming in the OASIS, a massively multiplayer VR world allowing players to travel into space, experience high fantasy, attend lavish parties, or simply socialize with friends. Cline’s novel achieved significant acclaim, but few writers have considered the scholarly merits of the book, particularly as an example of the overlapping functions of gaming and utopianism. This article examines *Ready Player One* alongside Bernard Suits’ philosophical approach to defining games and utopia. *Ready Player One* explicitly plays with ideas of eutopia and dystopia, games within games, reality and escapist play. As such, it is an excellent environment to examine Suits’ philosophy of games and showcase why gaming is essential to utopian fiction, particularly in the early twenty-first century. For Cline, games are equally necessary for a dystopia for much the same reason—they allow a creative and social “escape hatch” from the grim realities of futuristic decline” (“A Pleasant Place for the World to Hide’: Exploring Themes of Utopian Play in *Ready Player One*”). Here, all sense of self that one can have while situated in a material world of mundane reality dissolves and to the participants in that virtuality the ‘real’ will cease to exist and all that will remain will be mere staging of the real. The awareness and integrity of self will be lost amidst a sea of indeterminacy and all objective order or structure will falter thus giving way to absolute nihilism. OASIS contains thousands of simulated worlds and the player’s tasks will be to find keys hidden inside the nested hyperrealities embedded inside OASIS. Inside OASIS, all distinctions between real and virtual dissolves and 3-D objects of cyberspace surpass and supplant the actual physical space. The entire world of OASIS almost always resides in the Fourth level of simulation according to Baudrillard’s classification where simulated signs and symbols completely dominate and the meaning emerges from their mutual interactions in which any form of reference to an absolute or material reality becomes irrelevant. The first-person narrator Wade Watts says: “Everything inside the OASIS was beautifully rendered in three dimensions. Unless you pulled focus and stopped to examine your surroundings more closely, it was easy to forget that everything you were seeing was computer-generated” (Cline, *Ready Player One*, 27). If one accesses it with a state-of-the-art immersion rig it becomes indistinguishable from reality. The value system also assumes a life of its own which is far removed from reality and “...items in the OASIS had just as much value as things in the real world (sometimes more)” (Cline, *Ready Player One*, 27). This is what Baudrillard has stated in his essay that inside a simulated world traditional system of values based on the material exchanges of real world will have no effect and that simulacra can and will eventually supersede the original and supplant it in the end. Inside this world or carefully crafted mediatrix one can choose to become whoever he/she wishes and Wade chooses the avatar Parzival after the knight of Arthurian legend who had found the Holy Grail. Anonymity is the core driving force behind the massive popularity in this world of simulated reality where no one would ever know who a participant really is in the real world. This is one of the major reasons for our growing addiction towards virtual reality in our present-day period also as in this virtual world one has infinite possibilities of self-realization and self-fulfillment: “Inside the simulation, no one knew who you really were, unless you wanted them to” (Cline, *Ready Player One*, 28). Also, another vital aspect in simulated reality is the

increasing efficiency of any process by manifold as here from a limited set of coding languages a vast number of outcomes or outputs can be realized. This is evident in the act of construction of virtual schools which were not only numerous but also highly efficient: “The schools were all identical, because the same construction code was copied and pasted into a different location whenever a new school was needed. And since the buildings were just pieces of software, their design wasn’t limited by monetary constraints, or even by the laws of physics” (Cline, *Ready Player One*, 31). Simulation provides the learners with unique and interactive ways of learning new lessons as is evident in the words of the narrator: “In my next class, Biology, we traveled through a human heart and watched it pumping from the inside, just like in that old movie *Fantastic Voyage*” (Cline, *Ready Player One*, 48). Another important character that we come across as the novel progresses is a ‘gunter’ blogger and friend of Parzival’s, Art3mis whose real name was Samantha Evelyn Cook. In the description of her or more accurately her avatar we can get another glimpse into the unlimited potentiality of OASIS’ virtual reality. In her description we can see the need to imagine the body as mere container for the consciousness and dynamic intelligence in a posthuman and postmaterial culture where information will always be privileged over materiality. This is the Haylesian vision of Posthuman and the simulation culture provides a very potent medium for realization of this aspect of embodiment of disembodiment of self from the rigorous constraints of materiality. All the computer-generated avatars and not just Parzival or Art3mis in OASIS illustrate the Haylesian vision where all kinds of “essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation” will be annihilated. There are various kinds of beautiful faces which populate the world of OASIS in abundance but still the narrator feels Art3mis has something which sets her apart from the rest: “In the OASIS, you got used to seeing freakishly beautiful faces on everyone. But Art3mis’s features didn’t look as though they’d been selected from a beauty drop-down menu on some avatar creation template. Her face had the distinctive look of a real person’s, as if her true features had been scanned in and mapped onto her avatar” (Cline, *Ready Player One*, 35).

Art3mis also possesses some distinctive features which sets her apart from various other female avatars who populate the massive simulated reality of OASIS: “In the OASIS, you usually saw one of two body shapes on female avatars: the absurdly thin yet wildly popular supermodel frame, or the top-heavy, wasp-waisted porn starlet physique...But Art3mis’s frame was short and Rubenesque. All curves” (Cline, *Ready Player One*, 35). So, simulation technology not only attempts to homogenize and equalize all distinctiveness but also creates its own set of familiar patterns which in turn can help it to construct its own world. There are various levels of avatars inside this massive virtual reality construct and just like Baudrillard’s classification of simulacra in terms of their inherent power of providing resistance to the material level of reality, the players behind these avatars can choose to upgrade them in order to progress to higher levels in the game thus getting more and more drawn towards the infinitely puzzling and complex world of simulated reality. The world of OASIS is rich and highly varied and possibilities here are also endless. The world of OASIS contains numerous forms of simulated topographies and features - all very painstakingly crafted. The virtual world of OASIS acts like a strange attractor in a multidimensional phase space where the otherwise chaotic, dynamical system of simulated world settles down. So, while the bodies of the participants move about in the physical space of real world, their mind stays free to roam about and wander in the multi-dimensional phase space of OASIS-like hyperreal world and as such the avatars in the simulation are essentially free to evolve themselves to the cosmo-ontological state of posthumanity. In fact, as is stated in the novel, any user could find ways to beat the old video games because they were run by a finite set of predetermined instructions and could operate in a limited number of preprogrammed ways, but a game like OASIS has highly evolved artificial intelligence behind it which helps the game to create a complex spectrum of myriad of undetermined and random outcomes for any given input. Even in our real, day-to-day world novel computational techniques are helping us to create some of the most detailed, information-packed Universe-scale simulations like *Illustris* and its successor *IllustrisTNG* where thousands of processors run to generate data equivalent to several hundreds of Terabytes. The initial configuration of it was quite simple and it all started with the simulation of a few planets but then a rich variety of subjects and objects continue to populate it thus giving it an incredibly vivid appearance and also making it mind-numbingly interactive and in the process it becomes indistinguishable from actual reality: “Their environments ran the gamut, from sword-and-sorcery settings to cyberpunk-themed planetwide cities to irradiated postapocalyptic zombie-infested wastelands. Some planets were designed with painstaking detail. Others were randomly generated from a series of templates. Each one was populated with a variety of artificially intelligent NPCs (nonplayer characters)— computer-controlled humans, animals, monsters, aliens, and androids with which OASIS users could interact” (Cline, *Ready Player One*, 49). Like Baudrillard’s classification of simulacra in four levels here too the avatars of the participants/players are classified into various levels and the first avatar

simply is the least modified or equipped of all versions and one can even choose to stay in the risk-free zones for only hanging out with friends and for gossiping or chatting without ever getting into some potentially dangerous zones where players or NPCs roam. Also, another aspect of Baudrillard's theory of simulation which is illustrated here is that simulation will not stay as a mere medium or way of gaming; rather it can and will quickly evolve to become an entirely new way of life or an all-pervasive and all-encompassing alternative to material reality: "The OASIS would ultimately change the way people around the world lived, worked, and communicated. It would transform entertainment, social networking, and even global politics. Even though it was initially marketed as a new kind of massively multiplayer online game, the OASIS quickly evolved into a new way of life." (Cline, *Ready Player One*, 56). In the posthuman culture one of the most defining features which will set it apart from the culture preceding it will be integration of man with machine and virtuality. So, in the present day era of MMOs when players interact with each other online they are also organized into certain form of community via internet but in the world of OASIS there will be no physical or material 2-dimensional interface or barrier like a computer monitor for separating the players from their environment; rather the physical and virtual will merge into a harmonious whole. In various 20th and 21st Century movies and texts we see a growing urge from the part of the narrators and directors to merge themselves with the immersive tidal wave of virtuality by placing themselves on the other side of the screen and this is evident in the movies *Tron: Legacy* (2010), *The Lawnmower Man* (1992), *eXistenZ* (1999) and *The Matrix* (1999). In case of man-machine synthesis also we will see in the next chapter that in a posthuman culture all forms of barriers will be abolished and a seamless and internal integration between man and machine will be established. OASIS is a malleable form of reality or an open-source Universe which anyone could access with their device via internet and can escape the constraints of reality. Here one can assume any persona for him/herself and thus the virtual-psychological image of the body becomes free from the burden of hierarchical assemblage and constraint of organization of its separate parts. This can be analyzed with the help of Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the Body without Organs. The world of OASIS gives one freedom from the drudgery of vertical, mechanistic and hierarchical distribution of power and identity politics and opens the doors for infinite possibilities to enter. The body, the identity, the construct becomes a symbiotic entity built from the fusion of real and virtual. Also, when one is online one gives himself up to be analyzed, scrutinized and inspected relentlessly by the Panopticon vision of the authorities and here too the biopower of the participants can be manipulated according to the will of the controllers of the game. OASIS also serves as a piece for exemplifying Foucauldian organization of power structure in a bottom-up process in which the power structures and signs and symbols of authority are erected from within and not entirely imposed from without. So, the destiny of each and every participants along with the course of their lives in real world can be entirely controlled and manipulated by the authorities. In the OASIS like in any virtual reality environment the Foucauldian way of erecting power relations from within occurs by first granting the participants or the subjects a sense of freedom and freewill without their actually being so: "In the OASIS, the fat could become thin, the ugly could become beautiful, and the shy, extroverted. Or vice versa. You could change your name, age, sex, race, height, weight, voice, hair color, and bone structure. Or you could cease being human altogether, and become an elf, ogre, alien, or any other creature from literature, movies, or mythology" (Cline, *Ready Player One*, 57). In the OASIS one can become anyone and with full anonymity but this is merely a trick that the authorities play in order to create a new level of reality in their own unique way. The Suvinian 'cognitive estrangement process' as enacted by the simulated worlds here is in fact initiated with the help of some revolutionary innovation/s which she dubbed as the 'novum' and "the OASIS visor" and "haptic gloves" are two such instances of perfect novum which provide the fiction with its driving force. They are two major instruments for accessing the virtual world of simulated reality and it is with their help that the users could complete their dissociation with the plane of material reality: "The visor was light-years ahead of the clunky virtual-reality goggles available prior to that time, and it represented a paradigm shift in virtual-reality technology— as did the lightweight OASIS haptic gloves, which allowed users to directly control the hands of their avatar and to interact with their simulated environment as if they were actually inside it" (Cline, *Ready Player One*, 58). In the simulated world of crafted reality people spend their real money to earn and buy virtual status symbols and virtual vehicles and real estates. Here the simulation supersedes reality easily: "The OASIS became such an integral part of people's day-to-day social lives that users were more than willing to shell out real money to buy accessories for their avatars: clothing, furniture, houses, flying cars, magic swords and machine guns. These items were nothing but ones and zeros stored on the OASIS servers, but they were also status symbols" (Cline, *Ready Player One*, 59). This is the web of Mark Taylor and Esa Saarinen's 'Mediatix' from which once caught, escape is virtually impossible. The ones and zeroes are Baudrillard's signs and symbols which weave together a magical strand of alternative reality which is totally self-contained and completely independent from the reality existing on a material plane. The OASIS becomes a new

phenomena, a new mode of living and a parallel reality: “It was the dawn of new era, one where most of the human race now spent all of their free time inside a videogame” (Cline, *Ready Player One*, 60). The narrator feels that the hour after his waking up and cleaning and exercising his physical body is his most tedious part of life and for him now the life inside OASIS is the real life and the previous life which he used to lead entirely on physical plane of reality now seems to be a wasted land meaningless life: “This was when I dealt with the tedious business of cleaning and exercising my physical body. I hated this part of the day because everything about it contradicted my other life. My real life, inside the OASIS” (Cline, *Ready Player One* 195). OASIS transcends the very definition of online gaming and virtual reality technologies; OASIS becomes synonymous with parallel reality or virtual world. It has been the dream of many and upon its realization it represents a watershed moment in the history of mankind: “The OASIS was what people had been dreaming of for decades. The “virtual reality” they had been promised for so long was finally here, and it was even better than they’d imagined. The OASIS was an online utopia, a holodeck for the home” (Cline, *Ready Player One* 58-59). The scope and breadth of simulated reality that OASIS has presented to its users are simply enormous. The main idea is based round playing a MMO game but it has taken this gaming to an entirely new level. It has challenged the power of imagination of the users and has very successfully surpassed it. Everything that the simulation has crafted inside that world is rich in dynamic details, full of meticulous design and speaks of perfect craftsmanship: “The OASIS didn’t limit its users to just one planet, or even a dozen. The OASIS contained hundreds (and eventually thousands) of high-resolution 3-D worlds for people to explore, and each one was beautifully rendered in meticulous graphical detail, right down to bugs and blades of grass, wind and weather patterns. Users could circumnavigate each of these planets and never see the same terrain twice. Even in its first primitive incarnation, the scope of the simulation was staggering” (Cline, *Ready Player One*, 57). In this world of simulation everything can be simulated perfectly down to its last bit and this includes even human acts like sex too. In OASIS one can hope to engage in some highly realistic, erotic encounters by getting into standalone brothel simulation called the Pleasuredom. There are sexbots called ACHDs (anatomically correct haptic doll) that can provide one with the pleasures of virtual sex: “ACHDs came in male, female, and dual-sex models, and were available with a wide array of options. Realistic latex skin. Servomotor-driven endoskeletons. Simulated musculature. And all of the attendant appendages and orifices one would imagine” (Cline, *Ready Player One*, 193). There are Shaptic Bootsuits, full-body haptic feedback suits which cover one’s entire body from top to toe and are complete with an exoskeleton which has artificial tendons and joints to sense and control each and every movement of the user and an endoskeleton. The endoskeleton accurately simulates each and every feeling or minute sensations. There are webs of minuscule actuators placed in close contact with the skin of the player every few centimeters apart and which can be activated to feel the impact of all kinds of actions happening in that simulated world: “These could be activated in small or large groups for the purpose of tactile simulation— to make my skin feel things that weren’t really there. They could convincingly simulate the sensation of a tap on the shoulder, a kick to the shin, or a gunshot in the chest” (Cline, *Ready Player One*, 192). So again, we see that machine and man are getting into a close, symbiotic relationship where machines cease to function like some auxiliary appendages and are instead operating in close proximity with man. But the novel also points out at various points that no matter how much powerful and precise the simulation seems to become it ultimately fails to capture with utmost accuracy all the subtle aspects of various other forms of sensation which impress upon the mind/body of the narrator and there is clearly a gap or a void between the simulated experience and the real one. So when the simulations attempt to capture the sensation of falling water there is a gap: “My haptic suit did its best to simulate the sensation of torrents of falling water striking my body, but it felt more like someone pounding on my head, shoulders, and back with a bundle of sticks” (Cline, *Ready Player One*, 262). In the Pleasuredom where Parzival seeks to gratify himself in the absence of Art3mis with a virtual sexbot – a midrange ACHD named Shaptic ÜberBetty, he feels the vacuity and hollowness of such a simulated experience: “I confronted the grim realization that virtual sex, no matter how realistic, was really nothing but glorified, computer-assisted masturbation” (Cline, *Ready Player One*, 193). Simulations sometime can mimic the absence of reality in such a way that it represents the real in an even more perfect and ideal manner that the real itself can ever do, but in many subtle ways simulation leave one with a feeling of frustration and ultimate hopelessness. So from Baudrillard’s point-of-view certain type of simulations like capturing the sensation of torrents of falling waters and the act of making love etc. can be thought of as still belonging to the level of Second-order Simulacra which presents at its best a clear cut distinction between the real and the virtual but depending for its meaning and ultimate appreciation upon the references to the real and material. System Agent softwares are another type of softwares that attempts to elevate or upgrade the second-order simulacra to the next or third level: “Running system agent software was a little like having a virtual personal assistant— one that also functioned as a voice-activated interface with your computer. System agent

software was highly configurable, with hundreds of preprogrammed personalities to choose from" (Cline, *Ready Player One*, 194). In the third phase as we have already discussed, the simulation precedes and determines the real thus making any distinction between the real and the representation meaningless and irrelevant. Simulation not merely masks the reality and attempts to replace it with something like faulty representation; rather it often refers to some deeper reality underlying some well-constructed whole. OASIS, like any simulation initially started off as a project to provide a sort of escape from the reality and so it derived its significance and meaning by being different from the real, but later it becomes a new reality in its own right existing independently of any reference to the outside reality: "At a time of drastic social and cultural upheaval, when most of the world's population longed for an escape from reality, the OASIS provided it, in a form that was cheap, legal, safe, and not (medically proven to be) addictive" (Cline, *Ready Player One*, 59). From a Hegelian outlook modified to suit the Posthuman culture dominated by hyperreality, we can say that actual reality which spawned the movement called OASIS was the Thesis and OASIS was the Being and the growing popularity and influence of OASIS marked the phase of Antithesis or Nothingness where neither the virtual world of the game nor reality has clear upper hand over the other and it is the final Synthesis between the real and virtual symbolizes the last stage of Becoming. In the final stage however, even the avatar of OASIS's co-creator Halliday admits "as terrifying and painful as reality can be, it's also the only place where you can find true happiness. Because reality is real" (Cline, *Ready Player One*, 364). The final stage of Synthesis though clearly and unambiguously portrays the power of reality existing side-by-side the virtual, yet it does not produce any conflict or Antithesis. The ultimate lesson that it offers is that even though simulation might create an entire reality of its own, yet reality itself retains many of its unique flavor which sometimes makes it even more desiring than its simulated counterpart. The narrator feels that Art3mis looks more beautiful with all her self-perceived flaws in real avatar than what she does in her virtual representation: "To my eyes, the birthmark (Art3mis's) did absolutely nothing to diminish her beauty. If anything, the face I saw in the photo seemed even more beautiful to me than that of her avatar, because I knew this one was real" (Cline, *Ready Player One*, 292). We have to remember that the narrator himself used to fancy about how Art3mis might have looked in real life and before he actually sees her real beauty he was taken by Art3mis's words to finally believe that reality was somehow hideous and that Art3mis was way more beautiful in her simulated representation than in her real persona: "I pictured her as a physical manifestation of her avatar. I imagined her with the same face, eyes, hair, and body. Even though she told me repeatedly that in reality, she looked almost nothing like her avatar and that she wasn't nearly as attractive in person" (Cline, *Ready Player One*, 178). OASIS becomes not just a passive simulation or a MMO gaming platform, rather it becomes a way of attaining ultimate power and an instrument for wielding absolute command over the subjects. Various power-hungry multinational conglomerates like IOI or Innovative Online Industries also become involved in the race for taking control over OASIS by hook or by crook. From Baudrillard's point-of-view, reality, symbols and society are all constructed and designed from simulations and instead of being real the simulations can construct and reinforce its own authenticity by impressing upon the minds of the readers some semblance of reality. OASIS becomes the ultimate example of wishful self-fulfillment and realization of fantasies. Art3mis says to Parzival: "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" (Cline, *Ready Player One*, 171). The novel is based around the idea of dystopian wastelands, the collapse of economic structures and the emergence of a new era of social virtual reality called OASIS which enmeshes the users in a web of immersive hyperreality. OASIS is the final realization of the dream and the possibility of a self-contained and full realized artificial reality. Parzival not only follows the pre-given path in the game *Dungeons and Dragons* but uses the original module itself as a walkthrough and so even in the nested simulation where players encounter simulations within a simulation we see there still exist some scope for exerting the power of one's independent and creative thinking. Towards the end after completing Anorak's Quest successfully Anorak's avatar urges Parzival to return to "real". The entire quest of Parzival in many ways parallel Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" which the author decries art in order to champion art and here too in the novel ontological priority is deemed to be the absolute real and is given total privilege over the virtual. Parzival fell in love with the online avatar of a real girl of flesh-and-blood named Art3misa and the virtual love does not stay virtual rather assumes a real form thus transcending the barriers of the real. So, the real is instantiated through the substrate of the virtual and virtual becomes complementary to the real in the end. In their article titled "Kuchi, Cline, and Capitalism", Tom Ue & James Munday presents a critique of the novel from a capitalist viewpoint. They describe: "In a capitalist system, like ours, Wade can be seen as a representation of the wealthiest 1% of society, those who have essentially risen above the system that contains them, but he is not exempt from the pressures that the rest of the society continues to face. Halliday confesses to Wade after he wins: "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" (364). For all his wealth and power, Halliday has no currency in the happiness economy and he does not enact real social change. If anything, his answer, in the form of the egg hunt, has contributed to an increase in inequality both in the OASIS and in the real world. Wade inherits Halliday's capital, and with it, both a high level of control and the seemingly impossible responsibility of regenerating the OASIS and his real world" (6). Zenida Rihadasari, in his paper titled "Logging Away from Reality" (2020) strives to show that Wade's "identity in virtual becomes more real than real and the sign in virtuality toward reality", and for this purpose, the author views "Wade's shift to the virtual world as a form of logging away". Valentina Romanzi in her study of Steven Spielberg's movie adaptation of Cline's *Ready Player One* novel, attempts to explore the various ways in which the "three levels of reality (utopian, dystopian, and retrotopian) ... catalyse the plot and allow for a reflection on the role of nostalgia in our contemporaneity" ("*Ready Player One: Levels of Reality*", 1). The author states, "Following Zygmunt Bauman's definition of retrotopia as a leaning towards the past in search of the ideal society, I argue that the metafictional references scattered throughout the movie represent well the contemporary need to evoke the past and seek refuge in it through the assimilation of pop culture of the 80s and 90s. Moreover, I argue that the movie allows for a critique of the categories of utopia and dystopia, highlighting their intricate relationship and their nuanced meaning, and advocating for a shift of our attention towards the issues of the present" (1).

Critique of *Ready Player Two*:In the novel *Ready Player One*, we saw that the protagonist Wade Watts, AKA "Parzival," managed to win the contest in the extreme virtual reality realm known as the OASIS, as a result of which he was nominated as the sole heir to the estate of the business tycoon James Halliday, co-creator of the OASIS. Og Morrow, the other creator had already retired into oblivion. Wade, after donning the digital Robes of Anorak, becomes overly powerful in the reality of OASIS. In the real world, Wade becomes the head of the VR company, along with his old friends Art3mis, Aech, and Shoto. Now, in the very beginning of *Ready Player Two*, Wade discovers Halliday's game-changing technology: a new neural interface device that allows anyone to immerse in the virtual world of OASIS. It involves a complete five-senses interactions and thus offers its users a hyper-immersive sensory immersion. Besides this sensory immersion, it also allows the users to record, store and retrieve the experience with the overlay of his conscious experience so that anytime one can choose to escape into the desired reality of his/her choice. However, in stark contrast to the techno-utopian virtual heaven, in the real world we see not everything is alright as the biosphere itself seems to be crumbling. Wade's romantic affair with Art3mis has ended and he is now cold and morose. Wade, however, gets involved in another quest. This time, it is the quest for the Seven Shards of the Siren's Soul. But this quest is shrouded in total mystery from the very beginning and Wade initially does not get involved in it until a fellow "gunter" ("easter egg hunter") named L0hengrin appears who has found the first Shard and proposes to sell it to Wade. As Wade begins to get involved in the quest, an AI goes rogue and forces Wade to help it in its own quest for the Shards in the OASIS. Most of the novel revolves around Wade and his Company's attempt to thwart the rogue AI's attempt to destroy OASIS.

In *Ready Player One*, we see that Wade gains access to the Oasis Neural Interface, or ONI, a brain-computer link that can project the virtual reality experiences of their avatars to anyone logged into the OASIS. OASIS creator and quest-master James Halliday had hidden that technology away and Wade is the first one to gain access to that and even gains the power to destroy or shut off the entire VR world of OASIS. *Ready Player Two*, just like its predecessor, is full of references to pop culture and instances of people finding an escape route in the virtual world from the day-to-day challenges and struggles of their life in the real world. Paul Di Filippo in his review for *Locus Online*, comments, "Picking up the threads of the first book just a few days after that action ended, the sequel exudes the same charm and fascination as the original. Characters, tone, voice, all beautifully replicated, continued, and extended. But Cline does not merely push all the same buttons once more. How could he, given the vast climactic, life-altering victory enjoyed by its protagonist, whereby he jumped from lowest of the low to highest of the high? Instead, he levels up to new challenges and themes, while recreating the world we came to enjoy with new depth, as he exfoliates both the virtual universe of the OASIS, and the perpetually collapsing meatspace environment" ("Paul Di Filippo Reviews *Ready Player Two* by Ernest Cline"). During the final battle, we see descriptions such as this: "It was like Yoda versus Palpatine, Gandalf versus Saruman, and Neo versus Agent Smith, all rolled into one epic clash of the titans" (323). The characters from the previous novel who appear in this book are Wade's best friend Aech (pronounced H), Shoto, and Art3mis (Samantha's OASIS avatar), but all of whom are now fringe characters and we never get to see any development of their characters when they are not around Parzival, Wade's own OASIS avatar. All of Wade's three friends

run the company now and Samantha is seen to be traveling to the poor and the impoverished ones during her free times in the real world. In the OASIS, the people living there consider their creator to be nothing short of a god. This complete control over the entire VR world seems to transcend Wade to a god-like figure. Wade thinks: "Nobody knew that the OASIS's creator had rigged the whole simulation with a self-destruct button, and that I alone now had access to it. Nobody knew that the fate of the whole world was literally in my hands. Except me. And I wanted to keep it that way" (50). In *Ready Player Two*, we see how Cline describes the brain-computer interface by making an explicit comparison with the Simulation technology featured in Gibson's classic work *Neuromancer*. He describes: "The concept of a brain-computer interface headset that allowed you to record, play back, and/or simulate a human being's entire sensory experience had appeared in a bunch of Halliday's favorite sci-fi novels, TV shows, and movies. There was SimStim—the fictional Simulated Stimulation technology William Gibson had envisioned in *Neuromancer*. And a similar form of experience-recording technology had also been featured in *Brainstorm* and *Strange Days*, two of Halliday's favorite films..." (11-12). In *Ready Player Two*, we see how the power of virtual reality seems to transcend the very definition of humanity by blurring all distinctions between reality and virtuality. Wade feels that with his gaining control over the brain-computer interface called ONI, he has climbed the pinnacle of the evolution of simulated reality: "I also suddenly felt like anything was possible. Because now it clearly was. This was it—the final, inevitable step in the evolution of videogames and virtual reality. The simulation had now become indistinguishable from real life" (17). This is the perfect realization of the Baudrillardian fourth phase of pure simulation, in which the simulacrum bears absolutely no relationship to any reality whatsoever. Wade further explores the potentials of this ONI prosthesis, which can blur and dissolve all differences between physical, material, bodily existence, and existence as an upload in a virtual reality environment where there is no pain or no fear of death: "The OASIS Neural Interface was the ultimate prosthesis. One that could temporarily cure any ailment or injury of the human body by disconnecting the mind and reconnecting it to a new, perfectly healthy, fully functional body inside the OASIS—a simulated body that would never feel any pain, through which you could experience every pleasure imaginable. The three of us talked ourselves into a frenzy, listing all the ways this device was going to change everything" (34-35). Through the combined powers of ONI and OASIS, people could fully escape the sordid and painful realities of their day-to-day world: "The ONI made the lives of impoverished people all around the world a lot more bearable—and enjoyable. People didn't mind subsisting on dried seaweed and soy protein when they could log on to the ONI-net and download a delicious five-course meal anytime they pleased" (23). In one of our additional articles, we shall further see later how Neal Stephenson creates such a paradise-like virtual reality in his novel *Dodge*. In the virtual world of OASIS, the avatars exercise almost godlike authority as we see how one character named Kira even constructs as many as seven planets inside OASIS' VR universe: "Kira had played a key role in the design and construction of every single planet added to the simulation during that time... artists who had worked under her continued to use the world-builder templates she'd created, so in a way, she'd 'played a role' in creating nearly every planet in the OASIS" (71). We see that there is a planet that is dedicated entirely to a musical band/singer. While another planet is constructed based on a replication of the developer's home town. Users can work hard to translate one's private universe "into an immersive interactive simulation here inside the OASIS" (171), and we find how even using the copy of one's hometown, an entire planet can be recreated to mimic its features in the virtual world: "only one copy of the Shermer simulation, and it completely covered the planet's vast surface area." (171). Rizwan Virk, while drawing a parallel between the movie *The Matrix* and Cline's work, comments: "Speaking of *The Matrix*, where humans were forced to plug into a fully simulated world by superintelligent AI, what *Ready Player Two* implies is that we wouldn't need any malevolent evil overlords to make us plug in to such an experience. Humans would willingly plug in 24x7, or up to whatever maximum number of hours that the technology and physiology allow (in *Ready Player Two*, you could only plug into the ONI for 12 hours a day without getting some kind of neurological damage)" ("*Ready Player Two: The Upcoming Escape to Virtual Realities*"). In fact, the moment we will manage to map the qualia or the subjective part of human consciousness to their respective neural counterparts and electrical signals, it would open up for us new vistas for recording and transmitting the qualia. The technology which was described in *Ready Player One* involved the use of headset and advanced haptic suits for feeling the flow of events in the hyperreal world of simulation and this has already become a reality for us. Teslasuit of UK has already manufactured a haptic suit that lets us taste the kinesthetic sensations. One who records these experiences while wearing the suit will feel like he/she is actually going through these actual experiences. Elon Musk's Brain-to-Computer Interface (BCI) technology named *NeuraLink* can have highly useful application in case of the patients who are suffering from neurological conditions or spinal injuries which have caused irreparable damages to their limbs. Cline's work shows the way in which neural interface technologies like BCI could have

applications beyond the therapeutic and medical fields in such immersive and interactive fields of entertainment as video games as these interfaces can open the doors for transplantation of experiences from one participant's brain to another. As Virk observes: In *Ready Player Two*, in addition to the "escaping" motif, there is also the positive effect that empathy for others increases substantially when you can literally "be in their shoes" by re-playing their subjective experiences in your own brain. A husband can experience what it's like to be a woman giving birth. A heterosexual can experience what it's like to be homosexual. A bully can experience what it's like to be bullied. Perhaps we should ask, as Kline does in his novel, whether the positive effects of such immersion outweigh the potentially negative effects? Cline's novels invest virtuality with as much ontological and epistemological significance as traditional novels do with physical reality. Even though the novel is not primarily concerned with the depiction of dynamics of pure human interactions, yet in the portrayal of the love story between Wade and Art3mis and Og Morrow and his deceased wife Kira, we find some rare heartfelt moments of genuine tenderness. Instead of depicting people controlling the virtual from the real world, Cline seems to subvert the dynamic when he depicts Wade to be controlling a robot in the real world from his virtual world in OASIS. We also see a battle in the virtual world between the heroes and seven incarnations of Prince the musician, and also an adventure in to the realm of The Silmarillion. Paul Di Filippo comments: "Along with Matt Ruff's *88 Names* and Neal Stephenson's *Fall; or Dodge in Hell*, Cline new novel illustrates that the realms we dream into existence matter just as much—and contain as much heartbreak, pathos and love—as the one that some ineffable Creator dreamed up for us" ("Paul Di Filippo Reviews Ready Player Two by Ernest Cline")

II. CONCLUSION:

The study endeavored to analyze the role of simulacra and simulation in Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* and *Ready Player Two* primarily from a Baudrillardian point of view. The study undertook a critique of two of Ernest Cline's novels, namely, *Ready Player One* (2011) and *Ready Player Two* (2020) to analyze the trope of virtual reality from the perspective of Baudrillardian 'Simulacra and Simulation'. This study aims to show how in a hyper-immersive virtual reality environment, all distinctions between reality and virtuality simply ebb away when a new paradigm shift occurs in the form of the triumph of the virtual over the real. In such a hyper-immersive virtual environment, the virtuality does not merely serve as an alternative mode of existence where one logs in to escapes from reality, rather it becomes the dominant shaping force that begins to mold the reality after its own pattern.

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