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Ready Player One and the Fantasy of American Exceptionalism

Ernest Cline’s Ready Player One follows a story about Wade, a 17-year-old poor orphan grows up on the “stack” from Oklahoma in 2045, and his heroic figure in the James Halliday’s Easter Egg contest. In OASIS, a virtual reality platform, two groups of hunters (the player who join the contest) stand out during the contest: four players and Wade, who open the first gate first, and the Sixers, the Innovative Online Industries (IOI) employed players. The IOI rigs the contest and kills other players by using their superior power as the internet service provider. Eventually, under the leadership of Wade, however, the players defeat the IOI, and Wade himself wins the egg. While the story generally focuses on Wade and his success, the setting of the story is similar to every American’s hero story: the individual hero leads the world to fight against evil. The hero wins, of course, and affirms again some American’s core value that deeply rooted in every superhero story: “In a sense all superheroes fight for American values of justice, equality, and morality in a manner that preserves the dominant ideology and the American status quo” (Brown, 91). Similarly, Ready Player One uses Wade’s heroic story to promote this fantasy of American exceptionalism in three dimensions: the equal chance for everyone to live in a better world, the individual identity that Wade has, and the moral superiority Wade and other players represent over IOI.

One of the American core value is egalitarianism. The Easter Egg game provides a relatively fair game environment to everyone, regardless of their social status and race. Everyone has the chance to win “the egg” and becomes the most powerful person in the world. Halliday even announces the contest to the whole world: “Before I died,” Anorak says, speaking in a much deeper voice, “I created my own Easter egg, and hide it somewhere inside my most popular videogame—the OASIS. The first person to find my Easter egg will inherit my entire fortune” (5). However, because of the OASIS global network provider privilege, Sixers rigs the contest, as the book shows in chapter 15, “The sixers are using hacked immersion rigs, I said. "Sorrento was boasting about it to me. They've got it set up so that different users can control the actions of every one of their avatars” (156). In this case, the Sixers represent the force of evil; they have the privilege (money, power, etc.) to know more about James Halliday, to purchase powerful artifact (each artifact is unique and has its own special power) in the market, and to formulate their own army fight against “gunters” (players who participate “the Easter Egg” contest), making the game unfair. Wade, however, decides to end this unequal benefit IOI possesses. Publicly humiliating and killing Sorrento’s avatar in front of the world, Wade becomes the figure in the game who fights for equality. In the end, after Wade receives the prizes, he also wants the world to be more equal “We’re going to use all of the moolah we just won to feed everyone on the planet. We’re going to make the world a better place, right?” (371)

Wade’s story reflects individualism. His father died after several months of Wade’s birth, so he is raised by his mother. His mom has two jobs in OASIS, which makes her almost have no time to take care of Wade. OASIS becomes the real babysitter of young Wade that supports him in different ways. Eventually, at the age of 11, Wade’s mom dies because of drug addiction. Wade becomes an orphan. He lives with his aunt, but his aunt doesn’t really care about Wade. “I wasn’t welcome in my aunt’s room across the hall, which was fine by me. I preferred to crash in the laundry room anyway” (13). Wade builds his own OASIS play “room”, which is inside an abandoned van at the junkyard. After the huge explosion in the stack, all his relatives have died, and Wade has to be self-reliant and independent. This is consistent with most of the superhero movies. For example, Captain America’s parents died when he was a teenager, and Superman’s parents died when he was an infant. The superhero is always alone, so the combination of independence and superpower enables the superhero to fight for the world. They become special if and only if they are orphans.

Wade also represents the moral superiority in the story. Every time when Wade and his team got into the trouble, there is always an inevitable force that ensures their winning. They represent the “good side”, so they deserve to have good fortunate. For example, unlike most indenture workers who have to work for IOI before they clear all debt, Wade is able to hack into the database, steal the classified information, and change the data. In addition, in the last minute, Ogden Morrow surprisingly presents in the secret chatroom and uses his power to help the top four players, keeping them away from IOI. In the last fight against Sorrento, Wade fights for justice and morality:

Sorrento had tried to kill me. And in the process, he’d murdered my aunt, along with several of my neighbors, including sweet old Mrs. Gilmore, who had never hurt a soul. He’d also had Daito killed, and even though I’d never met him, Daito had been my friend. And now Sorrento had just killed Shoto’s avatar, robbing him of his chance to enter the Third Gate. Sorrento didn’t deserve his power or his position. What he deserved, I decided in that moment, was public humiliation and defeat. He deserved to have his ass kicked while the whole world watched. (339)

Wade wins not because his technology is superior to Sixers, but because of the fact that justice will be done; this fact represents the idea that the person or the country which has the moral superiority will win in the end. As a world leader, the U.S. possesses the same idea and frequently uses words like “morality” and “human rights” in positioning itself in the global community. For example, the intent of Iraq War according to previous U.S. president George W. Bush was “As long as the United States of America is determined and strong, this will not be an age of terror; this will be an age of liberty, here and across the world.” This is consistent with the superhero story. Jeffery Brown in his book *The Modern Superhero in Film and Television* using Superman as an example to state the same concept, “Over the decades Superman has embodied American’s beliefs in justice, law, and order, as well as assumptions about American moral and military superiority” (Brown, 94) and “Superman’s most recognizable slogan was altered to Truth and Justice for All” (Brown, 93). Not surprisingly, Wade is regarded as moral superiority “Superman” in Ready Player One.

As a result, the book, like the most American superhero stories, reveals and promotes the American core values. Wade is an American standard hero in the story, and his characteristics represent the heroism and exceptionalism of the U.S.: equality, individualism, and moral superiority. The stereotypical story, Ready Player One, seems to remind us again that the U.S. is not only richest and most powerful but also is politically and morally superior to any other countries in the world.

Works Cited

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“Chapter 4: America, Nostalgia, and Exceptionalism.” *The Modern Superhero in Film and Television: Popular Genre and American Culture*, by Jeffrey A. Brown, Routledge, 2017, pp. 90–110.