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Ready Learner One: Creating an Oasis for Virtual/Online Education

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Abstract: When the act of reading becomes a stimulus, it has the power to enact change within the reader and through readers. Adopting and using the methodological tools of autoethnography, personal narrative, and creative writing, I reflect and explore virtual/online education prompted by a personal reading experience of Ernest Cline's science fiction novel, *Ready Player One*. Cline's story offers a unique vantage point as well as a rich fictional vision through which I evaluate, contrast, and reflect on virtual education. My goal is to demonstrate how the reading experience of a popular science fiction novel may shape, modify, and/or inspire the development of future online education. I argue that reflective reading combined with the reader's embodied creative acts (e.g., the composition of personal narratives prompted by the novel and creative writing addressing a current problem that is inspired by the novel's fictional reality) lead to innovative ideas to foster the development of new paradigms for the creation of better online learning management systems. Thus, I present a personal narrative of reading to demonstrate how fictional works may offer relevant platforms for readers to contribute, to innovate, and to advocate for change within insufficient or inadequate systems.

Keywords: reading, autoethnography, online education, science fiction, learning management systems

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Prelude: The Inflatable Harness[1]

Like a tree offering its ripest fruit, I stretch upward with pride and desire. I place a sticky, fist-sized plastic toy horse into my mother's hand. There are numerous pieces of colorful play dough strands placed around the horse's neck and across its dark brown saddle. To the uninitiated viewer, the horse could be the victim of invading snakes or an army of alien parasites. Puzzled, my mother is somewhat hesitant to ask the usual question: What is it, my child?

"Mom, don't you remember the crossing of the sea?" From the way she tilted her head and moved her eyes toward the ceiling, I could tell she was thinking hard.

"The story you read last night, the one with the young prince. From grandma's thick, white book of fairytales."

"Oh, of course. Yes, I remember," she says.

"Then why can't you see it, Mom?" I can hardly contain my frustration toward her parental misunderstanding, so I blurt out before she can answer.

"The horse died at sea! She saved the young prince, but she could swim no more. So..."

"Yes." My mother looks at the horse more intently. "But what about the snakes?" she says in a soft voice, unsure if this is the question I want from her.

"No, Mom! No! They are not snakes." I reach for the closest pencil on my desk. Like a seasoned professor,

I point to the strategically placed play dough pieces on my creation.

"See," I trace the graphite end of the pencil along the worm-shaped accessories. "These are the tubes for an inflatable harness and saddle. The next time the prince goes on an adventure he will be able to use this to save his horse. This is why..." I point to a two-inch piece of red yarn sticking out of the play dough. "Here is the mouth piece that allows the rider to inflate the harness while he is riding through the waters."

I smile as a rush of pride leads me to ask, "Mom, would you please read the story again tonight but put my invention in it so the horse will stay alive?"

What Is Reading For?

As far back as I can remember, my reading life was never reduced to a form of epistemological or need-based consumption. My engagements with stories always pushed me beyond the purely intellectual or cerebral exchanges. The last word of a story or the closing of a book rarely signaled a true terminus. Finishing a good book often animated and energized my body. Like a mysterious plea from the author(s), I was called to re-imagine things, to make things, to perform creative acts, or to write new endings, new beginnings, new adventures. I felt as if every story was longing for continuation and asking for my contributions (Black, 2010; Flegel, 2014; Kellman, 1998). Thus, reading or listening to a story often became a powerful stimulus to re-materialize stories outside of the pages, outside of my bodily confines. Consequently, the act of reading has been inseparable from the question, "What should I make (literally) of this story or out of my encounters with characters, events, or fictional places?"

According to my mother, whenever she read a story to me, my usual reaction was to gather my box of crayons or pencils, or other available art supplies, to draw, to mold, and to construct my own versions,

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[1] I acknowledge that there is a gender spectrum and that myriad pronouns exist that I can use when referring to individuals in my writing. Throughout this article I will use "he" to refer to individuals who identify as male, "she" to refer to individuals who identify as female, and "ze" for individuals who identify as gender-neutral. I have selected these pronouns because I believe they are more familiar for a diverse audience of readers.

inventions, or alternative continuations of the stories she shared with me. As I grew older, I kept up with this act of transformation or continuation of stories through new tools and new artistic media, such as shadow puppetry, Lego blocks, or the invention and making of board games based on books and stories. Reading not only offered an experience, but it supplied me with tools and materials to create from.

In an essay titled "The Magic of the Book," Herman Hesse (1978) likens the child's ability to read to a powerful talisman that allows readers to navigate through stories in ways that may lead to self-recognition and tangible achievements. Similarly, many fiction writers promote reading not as a basic and necessary skill for knowledge acquisition but as an invaluable, powerful, and life-transforming embodied engagement, leading to epiphanies, discoveries, and personal change (Coles, 1989; Lewis, 1961; White, 1977). Other writers take this idea further asserting that, "reading makes us better human beings" (Nikolajeva, 2014, p. 254). It "helps us understand who we are and how we are to behave...how to live and die" (Lamott, 1995, p. 15).

I similarly value the range of experiences and the transformative power of reading, but for me the approach to reading always has been linked to the enduring question of 'how' and 'what can I create from the story I've just read or heard?' This question undoubtedly stems from my deliberate and radical interaction (Rosenblatt, 1994; Scholes, 1982) with written works because I often experience an overwhelming desire to "work through the presentation of a fictional narrative using physical, cognitive, visual, emotional, and embodied capabilities" (Serafini, Kachorksy, & Aguilera, 2015, p. 17). In his essay on Proust's aesthetic of reading, Robert Soucy (1967) claims that reading is closely related to the act of creating. Indeed, throughout my lifelong encounters with books, there has always been a strong affinity between reading literature and manifesting objects, ideas, or art through making because I approach literature as a "catalyst to the imagination," which often mobilizes my creative powers, stimulating making, embodiment, and change (Soucy, 1967, p. 55). Thus, I approach books with anticipation and hope knowing that answers or solutions might only emerge when I actively continue a story through making/creating, offering new forms of retellings (Cova & Gracia, 2015).

As follows, my encounters with books or stories are inseparable from the life I led. Reading is not an escape, but rather it is the discovery of a reservoir from which I absorb the necessary nutrients or means to pursue a meaningful existence outside of the pages. As a reader, I would like to offer a personal, but employable paradigm for reading fiction as means to build, invent, or imagine solutions for current and relevant problems or challenges.

In the following pages, I share how my encounter with Ernest Cline's (2011) *Ready Player One* influenced my attitudes as well as my active role in the reshaping of contemporary practices related to online education. Essentially, what I share through these pages is a story of reading and how it became a tool of inquiry and a drive to ignite change.

My Immersion into *Ready Player One*

I desperately try to find a reason to postpone my daily obligation of online instruction. I am dreading the chair and screen bound reality of grading for my assigned course, to facilitate the seemingly endless discussion threads, and to reply to my students' emails, which overtake my inbox daily, like invasive species. I make a mental note that this must be the dark side of online instruction (Conrad, 2004; Kraglund-Gauthier, Chareka, Orr & Foran, 2010; Regan et al., 2012). I decide on a brief walk in the neighborhood to momentarily escape, to clear my head, and to re-energize my body.

I reach into the pocket of my jogging pants in search of my headphones. With growing frustration, I try to untie the knotted mess of wires while I fidget to refresh my podcast feed. There is a new episode from Wisconsin Public Radio, so I pause for a second to download it to my iPod. I secure the buds in my ears, plug in the cord, and press play. I am out of the door for an afternoon walk. The setting sun and the cool afternoon breeze relaxes my body as the familiar voice of Jim Fleming (2011) delivers the following lines with great excitement:

> Ernie Cline can't get the 1980s out of his head. So instead of kicking his 1980s habit to the curb, he's embraced it and written a novel built around the time. It's called *Ready Player One*. The plot involves an eccentric billionaire named James Halliday, who has invented the ultimate virtual reality world: a massively multiplayer online game called Oasis. When he dies, Halliday leaves a hidden clue embedded deep within the game. Whoever finds it is heir to his fortune and fame. What will it take to win? Total immersion in the 1980s world of pop culture. Here's a reading from the book, performed by Will Wheaton...

I press pause. I unlock the screen with an effortless swipe, open my notepad app, and type a hurried reminder: "Ready Player 1." I continue listening to the full interview with Cline including excerpts from his book.

As soon as I get home, I check the online catalogue of our local public library. When I see the status note, "ON SHELF," I am overjoyed and rush to check out the book. That accomplished, I sit down on my favorite reading chair, turn on the old brass floor lamp, and with a steaming cup of jasmine tea in hand, I begin reading. But this is more than reading. I am transported into my own forgotten past.

Through Cline's (2011) references to the 1980s I am back in my childhood, back in my early life in Northern Hungary. I am traveling on an old, beaten passenger train, going to boarding school, surrounded by fascinating characters and old friends. Similar to a magical spell, I am re-experiencing long forgotten moments and places of my teenage years. Old memories are reflecting back from the pages in front of me as if Cline's story is a magic mirror catching the light from a long-forgotten world I once occupied.

Indeed, I am reliving a somewhat romanticized version of my past, but it is alive, and it is hopeful. It is as if I suddenly reestablished the flow of an electric current in a severed wire that supplied the necessary energy to animate my life and to disperse the looming darkness outside of the pages. Reading and remembering becomes a tonic to ease the anxiety I feel as a first-year graduate student assigned to grade for an online course. As I am progressing with the story, I am not only inspired, but I am more confident to purposefully engage with my students in an online environment as a helpful guide and teacher. Cline's (2011) daring vision of an immersive, highly engaging virtual world, the OASIS, makes me realize that my current situation as a novice online instructor is not just a trial by fire. It does not have to remain a dreaded, monotonous engagement with the digitalized renderings of ideas, questions, and students' complaints. Cline's story is offering both the possibility and the inspiration to transform my experiences and to advocate for change. Through the pages of *Ready Player One*, I witness what online education could become if I refuse to remain only a

"Cline's story is offering both the possibility and the inspiration to transform my experiences and to advocate for change."

consumer, a user without advocating for change. This book is like a portal transporting me into a world full of creativity and infinite possibilities, and perhaps this is why I struggle to exit the story by putting down the book.

After four hours of reading, I hesitantly close *Ready Player One* (Cline, 2011) using a crumpled piece of a gum wrapper that I find in my pocket as an improvised bookmark. However, I am unable to stop thinking and obsessing about Cline's virtual world: the OASIS. This fictional, virtual universe in *Ready Player One* captivates my imagination with a deep longing to escape my present reality, to immerse myself in a world of heroic pursuits, or to make a universe of my own. I don't want to stop the story, but I have other obligations to fulfill. I check my email notifications. I have 35 new paper submissions and 28 new discussion posts to engage with. I sit down at my computer. My anticipation is punctuated by the intensifying stress as I open up my browser and click on my student resources portal. When I see a hyperlinked word "oasis" on my university's home page, I can't resist thinking of Cline's *Ready Player One*. Now, this word, "oasis," is deeply embedded with stories, meanings, visions, hopes, and innovative ideas about learning and play. I realize that Cline's novel, acting as an invisible force, has suddenly reshaped my attitudes toward this five-letter word. Somewhat unconsciously, I am generating (perhaps) unrealistic expectations for any online system claiming the same name/brand, even if my university's choice of this 'brand name' had nothing to do with Cline's novel. I just can't help it. My mind's primordial default setting for finding patterns and connections can't erase the newfound hopes and expectations related to the university's online teaching and learning platform. I long for an OASIS or, rather, an oasis where virtual education is filled with adventures and excitement.

Oasis: Opportunities for Survival and Change

As geographical and metaphorical sites, oases represent unexpected fecundity and places of refuge where one can find nourishment and temporary relief from the surrounding vast, hostile, and extreme environment (Saint-Exupery, 2000; Faber, 2014; Morris, 2015). Oases are usually depicted as small terrains besieged by enormous deserts or wastelands, natural or man-made. Hence, oases usually do not stand for or call for permanent settlements. Rather, they represent temporary places of dwelling where travelers can restore their strength and equilibrium in order to continue their journey and to cross the harsh and usually lifeless terrain to reach their true destinations. Thereby, I find an oasis as a meaningful metaphor for education and learning because it offers a temporary safe environment to prepare not for permanent settlement but for the continuation of a journey through challenging terrains.

Ernest Cline's (2011) science fiction novel, *Ready Player One*, depicts a future as a dark, tenebrous dystopia where virtual reality became the last beacon of hope. Besides the fast-paced narrative arc, Cline offers an enticing and thought-provoking vision for online/virtual education. In Cline's imagined dystopia, the open world virtual reality of OASIS represents a better reality for many, and it also represents an excellent educational tool in contrast with the real world that resembles an expanding, hostile, desert plagued by poverty, disease, oppression, and inequality.

Cline's protagonist(2011), Wade Owen Watts, or "Parzival" (the name of his avatar; the personalized graphic representation of his virtual self through which Wade interacts within the OASIS) speaks about his own virtual education as a metaphorical oasis where this alluring, digitally-constructed space offered him both the stimuli and the necessary content knowledge to acquire the skills in order to

function and survive in the discordant world of 2044:

> I was more or less raised by the OASIS's interactive educational programs, which any kid could access for free. I spent a big chunk of my childhood hanging out in a virtual-reality simulation of Sesame Street, singing songs with friendly Muppets and playing interactive games that taught me how to walk, talk, add, subtract, read, write, and share. (p. 15)

The acronym OASIS stands for the Ontologically Anthropocentric Sensory Immersive Simulation, developed by Cline's (2011) fictional geniuses, James D. Halliday and Ogden Morrow. They define OASIS "as an open-source reality, a malleable online universe anyone could access via the Internet, using their existing home computer or videogame console. You could log in and instantly escape the drudgery of your day-to-day life" (p. 57).

This free and open access virtual world offers an engaging virtual learning experience for anyone who is willing to learn and to acquire skills and content specific knowledge in countless domains. The OASIS public school system on the virtual planet, Ludus, is "a grand place of learning, with polished marble hallways, cathedral-like classrooms, zero-g gymnasiums, and virtual libraries containing every (school board-approved) book ever written" (Cline, 2011, p. 31-32). The OASIS also allowed users to freely create and alter their digital selves (avatars) in order to foster equity and fairness within its digital confines. According to Wade,

> ...in the OASIS, no one could tell that I was fat, that I had acne, or that I wore the same shabby clothes every week. Bullies couldn't pelt me with spitballs, give me atomic wedgies, or pummel me by the bike rack

after school. No one could even touch me. In here, I was safe. (Cline, 2011, p. 32)

One of the main characters, Aech, reflects on this aspect of cultivating a second self when talking about her mother, Marie, who changed the gender and race of her avatar:

> In Marie's opinion, the OASIS was the best thing that had ever happened to both women and people of color. From the very start Marie had used a white male avatar to conduct all her online business, because of the marked difference it made in how she was treated and the opportunities she was given. (Cline, 2011, p. 320)

But to return to the educational opportunities of the OASIS, Cline's hero, Wade, or "Parzival," describes it as:

> ...the world's biggest public library, where even a penniless kid like me had access to every book ever written, every song ever recorded, and every movie, television show, videogame, and piece of artwork ever created. The collected knowledge, art, and amusements of all human civilization were there, waiting for me. (Cline, 2011, p. 15)

When juxtaposing Cline's (2011) OASIS with my experiences of online or virtual education, I feel both a longing and a tension that requires creative interventions. Since my time of reading *Ready Player One* coincided with my engagement with online education, I could not stop or quell my inquiry: 'In what ways might Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* shape or influence online education?'

Reading and Remembering

Accessing past memories through active remembering has been an integral part of my reading experience. However, I never consciously

paid much attention to the emergence of personal memories while reading a particular book. Throughout my reading life a story or a character often brought back memories that were either suppressed or forgotten. As I read Cline's (2011) novel, I became increasingly aware of the emerging memories and their potential role in my search for answers about online education.

Alain de Botton (2006) perceives our desire to remember as the necessary foundation and driving force for creative engagements and actions. Memories of our past often empower us to create, and the very act of conscious remembering also may keep us from repeating past mistakes. In his 1986 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Elie Wiesel proclaimed, "remembering is a noble and necessary act," and the rejection of our past and our memories may become a "divine curse, one that would doom us to repeat past disasters, past wars" (Abrams & Abrams, 1997, p. 176).

Cline (2011) also suggests that James Halliday's creative acts stemmed from the memories and remembrance of his treasured past. Halliday's memories of the 1980s are the substructure and the inspiration for his creation of the virtual world, OASIS, which in Cline's dystopia represents refuge, meaning, and a better world for most of humanity. Although Halliday's virtual world can be viewed as an illusionary reality, a digital fiction, it still offers a fulfilling escape and a temporary relief for the mind and imagination, but unfortunately it does not for the corporeal. Halliday's virtual universe cannot fully nurture or engage one's physical, embodied existence, though privileged users could purchase hi-tech user interface and hardware (e.g., the "Okagami Runaround omnidirectional treadmill" and the "Gym" stand-alone simulation), which used

one's body and promoted physical health and activity. However, Cline's story also suggests that one's meaningful engagement with this fictional, virtual reality (life in the OASIS) may impact, alter, or change the real, physical world.

Symbolically, OASIS (Cline, 2011) is like our memories and imagination: a collection of accessible but immaterial entities (e.g., images, stories, sounds, ideas) that have the potential to morph the physical world around us and through us. Thus, Cline, Wiesel (Abrams & Abrams, 1997), and Botton (2006) all offer us an invitation to actively remember and to explore our treasured memories (even our highly fictionalized memories) in order to create meaning or to offer at least a refuge for all those who may encounter us throughout the time we live, or through the stories, or through the writings that we share or leave behind.

> "Thus, perhaps it is the memories and the active remembering that ignites the forces of creativity, as a work of fiction or a story orients readers toward action and embodiment."

What became salient throughout my reading of *Ready Player One* (Cline, 2011) was how the story provoked and stimulated my own memories of the past. I often found myself pausing after a chapter or section because I was overwhelmed with emotions. Perhaps Ursula Le Guin (1989) was right when she compared the novel to a "medicine bundle" that one opens, uses, and shares in order to eliminate pain or illness (p. 168). For me, the engagement with reading, especially in a foreign language, while living in a foreign country is a form of medicine or healing aspects because each story becomes invaluable as I negotiate between the distant places of my past and my desire to "belong fully and truly where [I] live" now (Berry, 2010, p. 34). Thus, perhaps it is the memories and the active remembering that ignites the forces of creativity as a work of fiction or a story that orients readers toward action and embodiment.

As I progressed with the reading of Cline's (2011) fiction, I often found it impossible to stop the flow of memories and their powerful spell to re-live and re-examine my past. For example, Cline's references to the 1980s reawakened my own memories of those years of young adulthood. These memories then coalesced into new narratives, offering a new set of tools, methods, and paradigms, sustaining my search for answers and for solutions in my own present, namely to at least imagine a better future for online education. Also, the ways Cline represents the 1980s throughout the novel demonstrates how the past, even if people haven't lived through it (e.g., the protagonist and his generation), can purposefully serve and empower people as they face contemporary challenges. For Cline, history is a powerful tool for problem-solving and living.

Both Cline (2011) and his fictional genius, James Donovan Halliday, idolize the 1980s with its diverse cultural products. OASIS, according to Cline, began as Holliday's "homage to the simulation's direct ancestors, the coin-operated videogames of his youth" (p. 26). Cline in a Wisconsin Public Radio interview with Jim Fleming (2011) states:

> …as far as movies, and the entertainment of the 1980s, I think it was kind of a golden age, especially for movies, like those movies that came out in the 1980s made me want to become a filmmaker and a writer and just have inspired me my whole life, so that was one of the reasons I wanted to celebrate it.

Along these lines, we may agree with Cline (Fleming, 2011) that our personal histories, our memories, and the act of remembering may serve us in powerful ways to create from and to make sense of an era or time period. *Ready Player One (Cline, 2011)* is not simply an artistic, literary manifestation of Cline's imagination and homage to the 1980s. The novel is a reminder of our responsibility to preserve, appreciate, and celebrate the objects, ideas, and

memories of our past as well as to rediscover their potentials. If I am granted a glorious past, or even a short decade of a carefree and abundant childhood, I must also work on the creation of safe and sustainable spaces for future generations so that they may remember and create from their memories of a gratifying past that we engendered or made possible.

However, the real value of our past does not rest solely with the memories, treasured artifacts, or in the grand achievements of human beings. I believe that the real value of our past may be found in the remaining possibilities and its inherent resources. We can create from the past through re-discovering what was abandoned, unfinished, discarded, ignored, or ridiculed. We can create from the past by finishing, repurposing, reexamining, and recharging what was left unfinished, broken, forgotten, or exhausted. As Bochner (2012) says, we must "use the wreckage of the past to make a better future possible" (p. 212). Thus, reading *Ready Player One* (Cline, 2011) is both an invitation to remember and a challenge for the reader to reimagine our world; it is an invitation to create and innovate. Consequently, my task as a reader is to somehow contribute to the possibilities or to the vision of a "future [that] is not yet born…elusive, fluid, made of the light from which dreams are woven" (Kazantzakis, 1952, p. 62).

I am aware that this paper may not fundamentally alter the current paradigms of virtual education, but nonetheless my effort to weave new dreams into the fabric of reality remains compelling and valuable. My aim is to offer new pathways, resources, and inspiration to enhance my readers' "capacity to act in ways that may be transformative and are embedded in collective possibilities across and through time and space" (Till, 2012, p. 7).

My Frustrations as an Online Instructor

Before I log in to Canvas to continue grading, I strategically place *Ready Player One* (Cline, 2011) next to my laptop as an improvised shrine or as a potential refuge. When my login sequence is completed I am facing the utilitarian, text-heavy interface of the Canvas course management homepage. The long, hyperlinked list of assignments under the section titled "to do" with the additional items of "coming up" tasks paired with the large number of built-in navigational tabs induce a sense of overwhelming exhaustion and sensory overload. I click on the first item to grade. I can access the student's paper, which she wrote on Canvas' built-in text editor. However, to my surprise, I am unable to use Canvas' built-in commenting features. I cannot interact with her text through highlighting, underlining, or commenting on her paper. Soon, I learn from the help menu that I can only use that feature if/when a student submits his or her paper as a word document or PDF file. "Where is Captain Canvas, now?" I groan, which spurs some vivid memories from a few weeks ago.

I watch with great anticipation as 'Captain Canvas' enters the auditorium where I receive the mandatory training on how to use Canvas as a new, cutting edge, virtual learning and instructional platform at our university. As the Canvas logo appears on the projection screen, Captain Canvas, a self-proclaimed e-learning superhero, dressed in a cape and costume, takes the podium. With visible enthusiasm and an over-exaggerated gesture, she turns around, revealing her red and blue cape with a prominently placed gold letter "C" in the middle.

"Ladies and gentlemen, colleagues and TAs," she begins. "Welcome. My name is Captain Canvas." She uses her hand-held remote and changes the generic Microsoft PowerPoint slide. On the screen there is a quote from Josh Coates, the CEO of Canvas Learning Management System, in bold, oversized letters: "At

Instructure, we're solving a problem in education with technology. It's about real, permanent change." I am disturbed and rather skeptical about the idea of "permanent change" by technology, but Captain Canvas doesn't allow us any space to question or comment.

> Yes. Let me invite you to witness the opening of a new chapter in on-line education. Forget Blackboard. Canvas will revolutionize the way we teach online and measure student performance. And now, we are all part of this new history." Captain Canvas moves away from the podium, closer to the audience. A new slide appears with the text, "Canvas is the 21st Century LMS." Under the prominent, bold fonts there is a subtext in red letters: "Adaptable, Reliable, Customizable, Easy to Use, Mobile, Time Saving."

Captain Canvas continues,

> Canvas is designed with the instructor and student in mind. It lets you do your own thing because every feature and the revolutionary interface has been designed for you, for us, my dear colleagues. Canvas is created to save you time and effort, but more importantly Canvas is designed to make teaching and learning easier.

When Captain Canvas moves from the vague inspirational segment to the concrete examples of 'What Canvas Can Do,' I rapidly lose both hope and interest. I immediately recognize that Canvas is built on the very same, linear instructional paradigm other systems use. Yes, there is a more aesthetic and user-friendly interface. Yes, there are new features and tools, but for me it is just the same, existing technology with an emphasis on accessibility, big data, and cloud computing.

Captain Canvas passionately walks us through the steps of setting up a lesson with assignments and

quizzes, but what truly excites her are the Canvas features on the statistical measurements that allow instructors to monitor students' engagement. Captain Canvas' focus on tools of measurement mesmerizes the crowd as she reveals with a simple click of a mouse how an instructor can see when and how long a student was logged into the system and for how much time he or she spent on a page or in a module, including what link or page was clicked or skipped. While the majority of the audience is clearly resonating with these features, I am having a hard time seeing how Canvas is different from other platforms I previously used.

To credit the instructions of Captain Canvas, I admit that in record time I became "proficient" in using Canvas as an instructor. To an extent, it is a user-friendly and versatile tool. With existing content, I can set up an entire, semester-long course in a few hours. I can create various types of assignments and facilitate discussions. However, I cannot see these benefits as instructional or educational innovations. There is still very little or no place for creating an engaging quest or adventurous learning. There is no indication of a paradigm shift in online education, which can revolutionize the learning experience and the ways we create, sustain, and manage virtual environments for learning. For this reason, I find myself revisiting Cline's story for inspiration and hope, searching for adoptable solutions.

Cline's OASIS Versus Canvas by Instructure

Cline's *Ready Player One* (2011) is not explicitly a book about virtual education, but the book outlines the basic premises of education within the OASIS. Thus, my aim with this section is to use the insights and knowledge I gained from interacting with Cline's work in order to stimulate, to change, or to serve as the basis of generating solutions in the real world. In other words, I would like to use elements of Cline's fictional narrative as adoptable and

relevant ideas for continued innovation and change in virtual education or public education in general.

At the beginning stages of its development, OASIS, in Cline's (2011) dystopia, was a massively multiplayer online game that eventually "evolved into a globally networked virtual reality most humanity now used on a daily basis" (p. 1). Due to its features, popularity, and open access, "OASIS quickly became the single most popular use for the Internet, so much so that the terms 'OASIS' and 'Internet' gradually became synonymous" (p. 60).

When the book's protagonist, Wade (or Parzival), recalls his childhood memories and his first encounter with OASIS, he says:

> The OASIS is the setting of all my happiest childhood memories... I was introduced to the OASIS at an early age, because my mother used it as a virtual babysitter. As soon as I was old enough to wear a visor and a pair of haptic gloves, my mom helped me create my first OASIS avatar. (Cline, 2011, p. 18)

Later he adds, "Luckily, I had access to the OASIS, which was like having an escape hatch into a better reality. The OASIS kept me sane. It was my playground and my preschool, a magical place where anything was possible" (p. 18).

It is important to re-emphasize that OASIS began as a multilayer game, thus, the basis of all its later manifestations are rooted in play and interactive adventures. Although the basic framework for learning and education are linked to play and games (i.e., the Latin term "ludus" means primary school as well as game, play, and sport), these elements gradually lose prominence in many schools, thus students rarely describe their schooling as "a magical place where anything [is] possible" (Cline, 2011, p.18). Parzival reveals that the value of this freely accessible and user-friendly platform taught

him through playing interactive games, "how to walk, talk, add, subtract, read, write, and share" (p. 15). Although this may sound like a simplistic summary of educational outcomes, many contemporary educators would agree that the goal of education is indeed to teach us how to use and control our bodies, how to communicate and connect through literacy and numeracy, and how to creatively share ideas, knowledge, and our embodied learning in a rapidly changing world (Robinson & Aronica, 2009, p. xiii). For example, Elliot Eisner (1998) believed that the development of human sensibility as a fundamental educational goal could only be achieved through multiple forms of literacy. He warned about the dangers of an "epistemological parochialism that limits what people can experience and, therefore, what they can come to know" (Eisner & Bird, 1998, p. 16). But in what ways do our current digital platforms for online education make possible the achievement of such goals?

Canvas is defined as a massive open online course platform that was created by Instructure Inc. Its developers and marketing teams claim on their website that their "platform was built on the belief that everyone in education should have open access to high-quality information, data, and resources. No golden tickets, secret handshakes, or hoop-jumping required" ("Our Platform Was Built," 2018).

If the 'golden ticket' is a reference to Dahl's (2007) adventure story *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, does it mean that Canvas as a learning platform will not grant its users a once in a lifetime quest or adventure? Similarly, jumping through hoops, or "hoop-jumping," is not necessarily a bad thing. It is to complete or solve increasingly difficult challenges in order to demonstrate competence and determination. However, what is not ambiguous in Canvas' statement is that their primary goal is to provide open access to "high-quality information, data, and resources."

In addition, Canvas' central slogan states: "Canvas isn't just a product" ("Canvas Isn't Just," 2018). I personally find this claim difficult to accept, however, Canvas' PR team elevates the statement into the realm of symbolism, presented in all caps:

> IT'S A BREATH OF FRESH AIR. IT'S AN EDUCATIONAL REVOLUTION. IT'S A POWERFUL NEW WAY TO–PARDON OUR OPTIMISM–CHANGE THE WORLD. IT'S A RAPIDLY GROWING COMPANY WITH AN INDUSTRY-PUSHING PLATFORM, 800+ TALENTED EMPLOYEES, AND MILLIONS OF PASSIONATE STUDENTS AND TEACHERS. AND, SURE, THERE'S ALSO A PRETTY INCREDIBLE PRODUCT IN THERE, TOO ("It's a Breath of Fresh Air," 2018).

Thus, the main mission of Canvas is unmistakably to change the world as well as to offer an incredible product, which would be their educational software. Similarly, in Cline's (2011) story, OASIS is described as a breath of fresh air, but it moves beyond education and learning:

> 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. (p. 56)

Here, I am writing from my own experiences with Canvas both as a user/student and as an instructor/course designer. Canvas' main objective is, as stated on the site, "to simplify teaching and learning by connecting all the digital tools teachers use in one easy place" (To Simplify Teaching," 2018). As I previously illustrated through my personal narrative, it is possible that Canvas simplifies

teaching and learning, but it does not explicitly offer a stimulating online environment or platform for immersive, engaged learning, like in a video game, for example. Game developers understand that in order to keep people playing/learning that they must provide opportunities for rich, experience-based learning where gamers become motivated to overcome challenges, to come up with strategies, and to test those strategies in order to progress through the game. (Gee, 2003; Lacasa & Jenkins, 2013).

My intention is not to diminish the importance of CANVAS as instructional, as an educational software, and as a learning management system (LMS). However, CANVAS is not proposing a new or improved paradigm for virtual learning. Similar to other online instructional and learning platforms, CANVAS' basic architecture of instruction and learning is rather static and linear. The instructor creates modules or sessions, adding pages of content, quizzes, exams, discussion boards, etc. (John, 2014). Students progress in a linear path, completing task after task until they reach the end of the course (Mbuva, 2015). Consequently, online learning seems to be modeled after an unimaginative, teacher-centered and scripted traditional classroom instruction. Moreover, the virtual learning environments in current LMS web interfaces are even more austere than a physical classroom, and this indicates how the environment or learning space remains a neglected feature of today's virtual learning.

On the contrary, in the fictional world of Cline's (2011) OASIS, the environment or user interface:

> [is] 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. And that

was with my crappy school-issued OASIS console (p. 27).

If we value and understand the role and function of our learning environments, we must rethink education that takes place online. When we compare learning platforms with popular social media sites or other virtual places, it is apparent that interface design or design in general is not prioritized when it comes to online learning. The "walls" of the online classroom are still barren, teachers control the learning paths, and the system structures content delivery in such a way that it often limits peer interactions, alternative or nonlinear problem-solving, and scaffolding by the teacher or more experienced learner.

OASIS in *Ready Player One* (Cline, 2011) is more or less a virtual universe with multiple worlds to explore. Although OASIS public schools were designed after a perhaps ideal real-world school and classroom, students are frequently immersed into a rich experience of learning. Parzival's reflection on his own school days within the OASIS public school reveals aspects of the experience:

> All of my teachers were pretty great. All the teachers had to do was teach. It was also a lot easier for online teachers to hold their students' attention, because here in the OASIS, the classrooms were like holodecks. Teachers could take their students on a virtual field trip every day, without ever leaving the school grounds. (p. 47)

When Parzival describes content learning in various disciplines, it is deeply engaging and memorable. He paints a very vivid picture of this type of learning experience:

> During our World History lesson that morning, Mr. Avenovich loaded up a stand-alone simulation so that our class could witness the discovery of King Tut's tomb by

archaeologists in Egypt in AD 1922. (The day before, we'd visited the same spot in 1334 BC and had seen Tutankhamen's empire in all its glory.) (Cline, 2011, p. 48)

When Parzival proceeds to talk about his experiences related to lessons in biology, art, and astronomy, this is how he remembers such:

> 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. In Art class we toured the Louvre while all of our avatars wore silly berets. In my Astronomy class we visited each of Jupiter's moons. We stood on the volcanic surface of Io while our teacher explained how the moon had originally formed. As our teacher spoke to us, Jupiter loomed behind her, filling half the sky, its Great Red Spot churning slowly just over her left shoulder. (Cline, 2011, p. 48)

Of course, it is rather unfair to compare and contrast the simplistic, two-dimensional, text-heavy interface of CANVAS with Cline's (2011) vision for an immersive virtual reality platform. However, such comparisons may inspire engaged dialogues between software engineers, educators, policy makers, and founding agencies to create at least a more engaging and stimulating experience of online learning and instruction. What CANVAS and other LMS offer today is the distribution of digitalized content. These platforms enable students to learn through digital tools, to collaborate, and to be

assessed within a networked online platform, but I believe we can do more. We can use fictional narratives, like *Ready Player One*, to advance and enhance existing technologies.

Oasis: An Invitation to Create

Good fiction empowers readers to bring forth change in the world in which we live. A good story has the potential to inspire creators to construct bridges or pathways from an insufficient present reality (e.g., my experience in online education) toward an imagined future where the fiction of today may become tomorrow's reality. Even though we do not yet possess the affordable technology to allow students such experiential, transformative learning, Cline (2011) describes through the pages of *Ready Player One* that we must urge developers to experiment with new paradigms for online instruction. We should advocate for sensory and participatory learning where instruction, content delivery, and assessment are built into a virtual ecology of stimulating possibilities. The fusion of gaming and academic learning may offer students a more relevant and engaging learning experience where digital simulations, multiplayer gaming, and virtual worlds with skill-based missions are relevant features of instruction and learning.

People are investing more and more of their free time to a screen-bound existence. Both television and gaming are voluntary activities that people usually choose freely based on a desire to be entertained, challenged, or to escape from reality. These platforms of content delivery also promise continued excitement, surprises, as well as engaging

> **"Good fiction empowers readers to bring forth change in the world we live in. A good story has the potential to inspire creators to construct bridges or pathways from an insufficient present reality toward an imagined future, where the fiction of today may become tomorrow's reality."**

play with the possibility to connect other users across the globe.

I am not a computer scientist or a software developer. However, I am not deterred from reducing the distance between what I have (or work with) today and what we collectively could have in the future. Reading *Ready Player One* (Cline, 2011) did not end through the physical, and literal, action of closing the book. Similar to my introductory story of the Inflatable Harness, I feel compelled to create out of my reading experiences. Undeniably, I do not possess the skills or the resources to design a new LMS or to alter existing features of Canvas to bring forth a more engaging online learning experience. However, these limitations should not terminate my ability to craft at least an imagined story through writing, which is both a form of embodiment and inquiry (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). I believe that creating and sharing "material texts often demonstrate what matters through personal, scholarly, and social articulations" (Pelias, 2011, p. 665).

Personal storytelling through writing often serves as the beginning of the actualization of a tangible future product. The more we allow and encourage the emergence of imaginative or visionary works through writing, visual art, kinesthetic art, music, film, etc., the more opportunities there can be for imagined realities to eventually transmute into concrete forms or tangible products (Pink, 2006). In a way, Cline's (2011) obsession and memories of the 1980s were channeled into a fictional work through language and writing. Now, Cline's words and his imagined world is taking on a new form as Steven Spielberg and other creative individuals present the cinematic interpretation of Cline's work in March 2018. Thus, creative and imaginative interventions with existing materials may support or encourage the development of actual products or new possibilities for experimentation and innovation.

My reading of *Ready Player One* (Cline, 2011) has also coincided with a face-to-face graduate course on children's literature theory where each week we read, discussed, and analyzed J. M. Barrie's (1940) *Peter Pan* through the lenses of various literary theories, e.g., Feminist, Marxist, Narrative, Postcolonial, etc. Each student had to propose a project through which we demonstrated how the reading of a fictional work might influence our present and future lives. Since I was reading *Ready Player One*, I decided to creatively superimpose Cline's narrative with my present-day reality. I felt compelled to craft my own short story of an imagined future as both Cline's and Barry's work reminded me of the value of dreaming and writing. A written story that appears on a page is already an embodied vision. Therefore, a written story is more valuable than an idea or a dream. A written story is a small but steady step toward the actualization of an audacious dream, and this is the least I can offer as a learner who is seeking change.

My Imagined Future: Ready Learner One

I hand my bucket of heirloom tomatoes to a student from the culinary arts program. I glance over the railing of the rooftop garden, and I see a group of students sitting on colorful blankets. No one seems to be rushing. To be honest, I never thought that virtual education would actually strengthen the university community, transforming the campus into a vibrant hub of learning or a second home where I felt honored to belong to.

Indeed, the virtual turn in education has transformed campuses across the United States. As courses and lectures moved into the virtual realm, physical classrooms were transformed into maker spaces, studios, and conversation hubs where students and faculty gathered to interact and work on hands-on projects and performances.

"It's exactly fourteen pounds. Make sure to add this to your record," I hear a voice behind me, but I am already running toward the staircase. There is a rumor about a new virtual trip in Professor Schneider's Children's Literature Theory class. About a week ago in Dr. Flores' kinesthetic learning platforms (K-Station) with 360-degree full immersion, particle screens (FIPS) were installed in the rotunda of the college of education. This means that today I will not be confined to a chair wearing a clunky VR goggle strapped onto my head for the virtual lecture.

As I descend the staircase from the rooftop garden, I realize how much I enjoyed coming to campus. I especially loved USF's project-oriented workshops. Professor Papke, for example, just offered a new course on fermentation and literacy. I am eager to enroll, as the first assignment according to the syllabus is to design a beer label based on Maurice Sendak's (1991) infamous *Where the Wild Things Are*. The assignment also requires the inclusion of a product name, a pictorial design, and some enlightening quotes that informed beer drinkers about the joy of beer and literacy. Not to mention that one of the course outcomes will be the actual production and marketing of this beverage.

When I enter the sunlit rotunda of the college of education, it is hard to miss the newly installed K-Stations. I count 24 gleaming machines, placed side-by-side in a circular pattern. They look like a cross between an ultra-modern elliptical machine and a treadmill. I am both excited and hesitant as I step onto the platform. To my surprise, the main control panel immediately comes to life with various options from which to choose. I knew that K-Stations supported various learning habits (LH), so I move my index finger toward the stationary bike icon since I was kneeling for hours in the garden. As soon as I touch the icon, the K-station morphs into a sleek bike with the flashing message, "Welcome Learner One." I can't wait to give it a try and start

moving. Indeed, I resonated with Dr. Flores' philosophy that most humans learn best through movement and that virtual education must include, train, and challenge our bodies.

As soon as the bike adjusts to my body type I am surrounded by an egg shape, a fully enclosed particle screen (FIPS). This particle-generated bubble will act as the high definition screen onto which the virtual realty world is projected.

Since I have a few minutes to spare before class starts, I select a warm-up program from a long list of exciting options. I decide on a virtual version of the infamous bike ride from the famed, affectionately-described alien movie E.T., but I notice a recent update from our beloved librarian, Dr. Griffin. She added the option to bike through a beautifully rendered virtual Hogwarts instead of the streets Hawkins, CA.

My lips automatically morph into a smile as I am speeding through Hogwarts, trying to avoid running into students, while E.T. sits in my basket hysterically laughing and pointing with his beaming finger to new corridors to explore. I feel energized and fully awake.

However, my fantastic ride is cut short by the appearance of Professor Schneider, whose avatar today, not surprisingly, is the young Lev Vygotsky dressed in Gryffindor attire. She is asking each of us to turn a Vygotsky quote or concept into a poetic spell, which will grant us access to today's learning adventure. I quickly come up with a haiku, where the first words of each line form the acronym for the Zone of Proximal Development. When I recite my haiku into the virtual microphone, my K-Station's 360-degree particle screen goes into a familiar green-gold screen with the blinking words *Ready Learner One.*

It seems that I can continue using the bike option with E.T., but instead of Hogwarts, I am pedaling

through Vygotsky's alma mater, the Moscow State University. The virtual arrows appearing on the hallways guide me to a classroom door with the sign *Children's Literature Theory*. To my surprise, the door leads to a rooftop of a large building. I look around, and I see all my classmates, but we are no longer in Moscow. I ride toward the edge of the roof to get a better look and quickly realize that we must be in London.

Professor Schneider signals us to follow her. We are all casually biking on the flat roof, staying together in a group. Professor Schneider is talking about the significance of this particular building related to J. M. Barrie. Photos of Barrie and artifacts from his life appear as 3D projections on the chimneys as we ride by. We are supposed to touch or ride through the objects so that they can be added to our inventory as class notes. I quickly collect the last item when Professor Schneider's bike gains enormous speed. From a distance, it's like an unexpected breakaway in a bike race. We all try to keep up, but she is directly heading toward the edge of the roof. I try to press on my hand breaks and change direction, but all my controls are locked. I close my eyes. I hear Megan's scream as we speed toward the ground. This must be a system error or the result of my late homework submission, I speculate, but after a few seconds of a terrifying virtual fall, my bike stabilizes in midair. I slowly open my eyes and look around. We are all riding above the city just below the thick, moisture rich, cumulous clouds. There is no time to marvel at this sight because Professor Schneider suddenly changes direction, disappearing in a nearby cloud. Suddenly, there is a blinking message warning on my learning interface. I click the message, which unfolds into an old-fashioned map of London. I can't remember the last time I held or used a map, since my reliance on GPS was unconditional. I begin to panic, because the assignment is to locate Kensington Gardens in 3 minutes with the help of this the map. I desperately

search for landmarks. Fortunately, I see my classmate, Joyce, heading toward a round pond in the distance. I know Joyce is familiar with practical things, like how to read a map, so I decide to follow her lead to locate Kensington Gardens.

Of course, my classmate, Sarah Pennington has beaten all of us to reach the location first, so she is the lucky one to receive the virtual edition of the handwritten manuscript of *Peter Pan* by J. M. Barrie (1940).

We gather around the sculpture of Peter Pan, and, to my surprise, Professor Schneider transforms into Barrie himself. We all ride with her through Kensington Park while she is sharing stories about Barrie's life and the little-known facts about writing *Peter Pan* (1940). After circling the Peter Pan statue a couple of times, Professor Schneider (J M Barrie) changes direction and we follow her to a small theatre in the nearby neighborhood. I switch my K-Station into WNW mode (walk and work), and walk into the building. To my surprise there is no stage set, and all the actors on the stage are only wearing jeans and white T-shirts. Dr. Schneider/Barrie gives us the task to design the stage set, costumes, as well as the script for the opening scene of a theatrical play based on *Peter Pan*. To make the task more difficult, she adds that our play will premier in front of a group of Palestinian elementary school students, their parents, and their teachers. Professor Schneider suggests that we should consider adopting a post-colonialist perspective into our stage design and play to demonstrate how a dominant culture may use their power and control to exploit or suppress the minority or indigenous population.

I am assigned to work with Stephanie; she always attends class with her virtual pug, Seuss. We work tirelessly on our assigned task, and we are shocked when the end of class notification appears on our

FLIPS. We stare at the screen in disbelief unable to process how three hours flew...by so fast.

"We are not done!" Stephanie and I cry out at the same moment. But fortunately, we can both log back in from home and continue working. One thing I know for sure. I can't wait for the invitation, *Ready Learner One*.

Epilogue: Building on Visions

Ready Learner One is more than an imaginary scenario inspired by Ernest Cline's (2011) science fiction novel. It is an invitation to continue engagements to inspire making, creating, and to build/compose from fictional narratives. It is also an attempt to nurture a vision and to keep alive a desire for an educational system that engages my whole self in ways that foster change, development, and may result in the actualization of a best self. I understand that the gap between the present reality of virtual or online learning and my fictional story seems wide. However, I believe that imagination and the active manifestation of bold visions into new forms, like science fiction, movies, and games, are the foundations for change and innovation. Junot Diaz in a radio interview with Krista Tippet (2017), shares a similar notion, saying that for him, "science fiction offered the possibility of different ways of being and of ways of possibly overcoming the cage that surrounded us." Thus, working with CANVAS, at least for me, no longer presents an alienating, impenetrable locked cage. My reading of and engagement with Cline's story has taught me that I too have an active role in transforming or dismantling this metaphorical cage.

What emerged from my engagement with Cline's *Ready Player One* (2011) is essentially the hope for change and a small, personal contribution of building on Cline's vision. My intention is not to outline an adoptable, ready-to-use blueprint for online education, nor do I want to diminish the value of current educational paradigms in virtual spaces. However, I would like to advocate for imagining new realities and new paradigms fueled by an intentional reading engagement that centers on creating solutions or at least tangible visions to ignite innovation, change, and improvements. When reading fiction is combined or integrated with creative acts, the reader-maker becomes an agent of change.

If there is a need, a longing, and a hope for a more engaging virtual education, learners and educators, software engineers, and policymakers should consider the values of imagined and fantastic realities regardless of shortsighted speculations about the possibility of attainment. Fictional visions, like Cline's (2011) OASIS, offer us a space to question, to re-evaluate, and to re-orient the ways, practices, and methods through which we occupy our present realities, thus purposefully engaging with fictional visions or fantastic ideas that can greatly contribute to the driving force of human desire and to our ability of actualizing dreams, even if they seem impossible today.

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