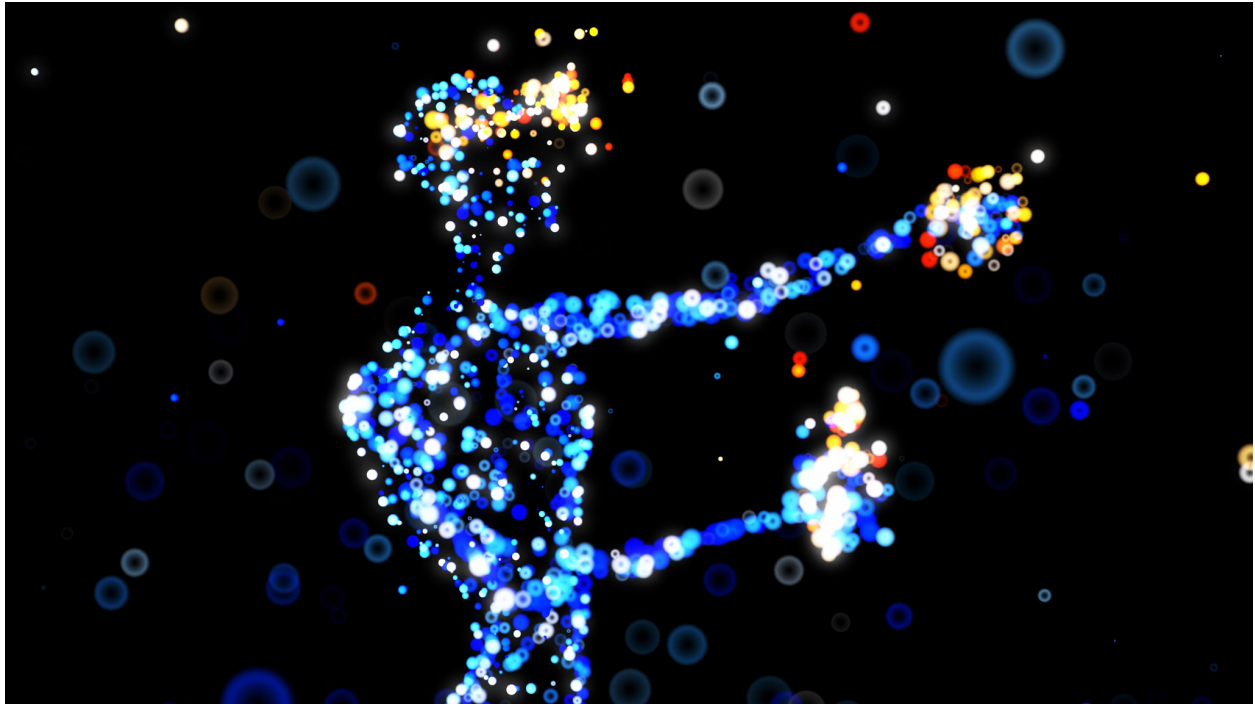


The Modern Obsession with Escapism

Natalia Gladysz | Editor-in-Chief



Escapist fantasies are more readily available than ever before. With the touch of a screen, the modern person can open to any “reality” they please; an incredible selection of movies, shows, games, videos and books exist to quench the thirst of anybody seeking an easy escape from the world our ancestors fought to survive in. With our immediate needs satisfied, we resort to the avoidance of reality and the hedonistic pleasure screens readily provide us with.

Back in 2021, following the COVID-19 pandemic and the shutdown of schools worldwide, my TikTok feed notified me of the newly released *Inside*, a Netflix special created by an entertainer I have not heard of before: Bo Burnham. I didn’t immediately watch the special, opting to watch his performance of one song that seemed to be especially popular among other TikTok users instead.

“Welcome to the Internet” was a hit. At the time of writing this, Burnham’s performance of the song has amassed over 150 million views on YouTube. Its message on the growing maliciousness of online spheres and their firm grasp on users worldwide resonated with young

people who had been shut out of the real world in 2020, using their internet-connected devices more than ever to reconnect in an alternative way.

While I wouldn't recommend watching Burnham's highly inspired and introspective special to everyone—parts of it are vulgar and intentionally uncomfortable in a way that I personally try not to engage with—its messaging on the danger of the internet is very real.

“Could I interest you in everything, all of the time?... Apathy's a tragedy and boredom is a crime,” Burnham sings, embodying the internet itself. The tone of the song quickly becomes frantic, crass, and corrupt, vying for the viewer's attention in the way the internet succeeds in doing everyday for millions of users worldwide.

The internet and its many escapist possibilities offer a refuge from daily life. It is a source of distraction, which people crave. This constant need for distraction suggests that the modern man desires ignorance. People need to be occupied with something other than the natural existentialism the mind is drawn to in silence to thrive. Sources of distraction are readily available to us, and for this reason, the masses are all too ready to surrender themselves to whatever happens around them as long as a screen keeps their mind within the world it creates for them (a world that will come crashing down if their immediate comfort is threatened).

Most people are not in positions of power and have little control over the state of the world they live in. In this case, isn't it better to resign to bursts of dopamine and simple pleasures instead of engaging in a reality that feels threatening? This seems to be the mentality of the modern human being, and it isn't entirely wrong.

Humans have always been escapist, whether through the use of art and oral storytelling or VR headsets. However, this insane rise in accessibility is too much. There's a difference between texting a long distance friend or researching a topic online and scrolling mindlessly through TikTok to avoid a semblance of independent thought.

In moderation, sources of escapism are more than fine. They're beneficial in a variety of ways—I don't need to identify every way in which the internet has improved life, because its benefits, like the dissemination of important information or immediate responses to medical questions, are well-known. In terms of escapism, the internet has provided us with laughs and a rest from reality after a hard day. Video games and books offer a diversion from difficult thoughts and emotions, which is great as long as they're used as methods of avoiding destructive thoughts and not reality altogether. It's the overuse of escapist media that I find worrying, not the brief comfort and joy it can give us.

The most important takeaway regarding escapism is that its use cannot overshadow physical reality and eat away at a person's limited time alive. Drowning in escapism is what is preventing so many people from achieving great feats in the world outside of their distractions of choice, and as much as people like Burnham or I may argue against incessant distraction, which I engage in all the time, the comfort of escapism is difficult to escape and seemingly pointless to avoid in many cases.

Is the future of humankind to live pacified lives like the ones portrayed in Pixar's *Wall-E*? Will people all eventually succumb to comfort over action? Will human nature continue to bend so easily to entertainment over real-world experiences? I don't think so.

The internet is popular, but its excessive use could lead to a reaction of future self-imposed limitations and the more purposeful use of technology with mental health, the environment and immediate physical needs being ranked above easy distraction. The truth is that we live in a time and place of relative (physical) ease compared to our ancestors. As soon as our immediate needs become threatened again, something that will inevitably happen either to us or to our descendants, humans will be forced to engage with more pressing matters and lead fuller, more enriching lives than many of us currently do—though this possibility will come at the cost of the fulfillment we can achieve in our present circumstances when many of us hopefully have those needs accounted for. Regardless of this future possibility, we can aim to engage in escapism within reasonable limits right now. We can seek out more real-world experiences and accomplish feats that will enrich our lives and make them more bearable, eliminating the constant desire to

return to a screen for immediate comfort. Instead of being overwhelmed and distracted by the “mountains of content” Burnham sings about, we have the choice to engage in real-world scenarios with far greater rewards than escapism can impart on us.

Photo:

<https://unsplash.com/photos/a-blurry-image-of-a-baseball-player-swinging-a-bat-EOSHmMbjT8>

 by Julien Tromeur