Faculty Work Comprehensive List

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Ready Player One (Movie Review)

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Abstract

Posting about the movie *Ready Player One* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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"Ready Player One" Review

Josh Matthews   April 27, 2018

Title: Ready Player One
Directed by: Steven Spielberg
Written by: Zak Penn and Ernest Cline
Starring: Tye Sheridan, Olivia Cooke, Ben Mendelsohn, Lena Waithe, Mark Rylance, Simon Pegg
Music by: Alan Silvestri

If at the end of a movie I feel stupider than when it started, I figure that this is not a good thing.

Movies can render me stupid in many ways. Sometimes, a stupid movie is wildly entertaining, the artistic equivalent of a Dairy Queen blizzard—that is, fake ice cream that nevertheless manipulates my taste buds for a few minutes.

Sometimes, a stupid movie is so offensive that I rage inwardly and struggle with whether I ought to throw my shoes at the screen.

Sometimes, stupid movies are just "meh" (as the expression goes), and these are the worst because they eat up my life without giving anything back.

Ready Player One somehow checks off all stupid-movie possibilities for me. It operates on one or more levels of stupidity at various times, up until its last shot, when it brings all of those levels together.

(Read no more if you wish to avoid knowing why this movie is stupid. Spoilers lurk within this review.)

The cause of the movie's problems might be due to the novel it's based on. Not much of significance has changed between novel and script, which was a major error because the novel, albeit an engaging page-turner, contains pages and pages and pages and pages of unnecessary exposition.

Similarly, the movie is full of exposition—chock-full, which in moderation would not be all that bad given that Steven Spielberg is the master of making dull, informational speeches interesting. But on and on we go, beginning with a voiceover narration lasting for the first fifteen minutes of the movie, until everything is explained by telling us all about it. And that's only the beginning.

The puerility of the plot, also an unfortunate survivor of the novel-to-script adaptation, knows no bounds. The setting is Columbus, Ohio, the year 2045, in which most people live in scaffolded trailer courts, which are essentially tall buildings composed of one trailer on top of another.

It's an impoverished world, we are told by Wade Watts, the film's 18-year-old male narrator, who says resignedly that he was "born after people stopped fixing problems, and now we just try to outlive them."

How do they try to outlive abject poverty? By spending almost all of their time in a virtual reality world called the Oasis. The movie's opening shots depict the vastness of this virtual world, which is inhabited by avatars controlled by real people inside of trailers. Living somewhat like the proles in Orwell's *1984*, they jump around in their tiny trailers, suited up in their expensive virtual-reality equipment. They seem oblivious to the dystopian world they inhabit, but we are not. To us, they look pathetic and alienated.

With this premise, the movie seems to be making unbreakable promises. Chief among them is that it will deal meaningfully with the disconnection between its horrendous real world and the rather wondrous virtual world that humans are escaping into.

Not only does *Ready Player One* breaks its promises, but in the end, it leaves the peons in their trailers to remain as mere peons in their trailers. The movie's final solution is to keep the entire virtual world intact, except that instead of accessing it any time you want, you can only do so five days a week. (Watts himself is responsible for this two-day sabbath, and I think that the sequel should feature the trailer-park rebellion against Watts' tyrannical rule.)

This absurdity is coupled with the movie's main plot, a Horatio Alger/Charlie Bucket story in which winning all the treasure and getting the girl are the chief plot goals.

Watts (Tye Sheridan) is the boy who seeks that goal. A trailer-park denizen, he too lives almost entirely in the Oasis. He loves popular culture from the 1980s, and he knows every detail about James Halliday (Mark Rylance), the out-to-lunch tech genius who inexplicably, and in spite of his stoner mannerisms, summoned forth enough manic energy to build the Oasis from scratch.

When the movie opens, Halliday has died years ago, but he's left a treasure hunt within the vast Oasis. Whoever follows the clues and finds the X-that-marks-the-spot will win his fortune, which is ownership of the Oasis and half-a-trillion dollars. This fortune has spurred a years-long hunt within the Oasis. Easter-egg hunters such as Watts, known as "gunters," have memorized every minute of Halliday's life, in order to have enough arcane knowledge to find the fortune.

In the Oasis, Watts takes the nickname Parzival and changes his appearance whenever he wants. Watts' best friend is Aech, and he eventually teams up with other gunters—Sho, Daito, and Art3mis. Watts doesn't know them in the real world, but that doesn't stop his Parzival avatar from declaring his undying love for Art3mis, an ET-looking female avatar who knows as much arcana about Halliday and 1980s pop culture as Watts does.

The threat for Watts is that Art3mis could be anybody in real life. Of course, she turns out to be a lovely young lady in reality—smart, spunky, caring, and near-perfect. Thus does *Ready Player One* fulfill every male nerd's improbable fantasy, which is to have a female companion who loves videogames, tech, comic books, and other hallmarks of beta-male culture as much as the nerd does. (No offense intended; I speak as one.)

Ready Player One does not try to deviate from the long tradition of science-fiction stories about virtual reality, which usually feature international corporations as really evil bad guys. So, of course, Watts battles the really evil IOI Corporation. IOI has a massive army of workers who scour the Oasis for Halliday's fortune—these are the enemies of independent gunters like Watts and Aech.

In the spirit of the stupid 1980s movies that *Ready Player One* honors and emulates, everything about IOI is cheesy, except its terror-bombings of poor people in Columbus' trailer courts. Chief among the cheese is Nolan Sorrento (Ben Mendelsohn), IOI's CEO, an unconvincing villain who is more an annoyance than a menace.

I suspect that *Ready Player One* itself is an Easter-egg hunt, filled with hundreds of pop-culture references from the last forty years. Some of those are overt. At one point, Watts chooses to dress like Buckaroo Bonzai. He drives around in a DeLorean and, to avoid the bad guys, he uses a "Zemeckis Cube," named after director Robert Zemeckis, which reverses time by sixty seconds. Later, in an elaborate sequence, the main characters must find one of Halliday's clues by going into *The Shining*, Stanley Kubrick's 1980 horror movie.

Reader, you might enjoy that vast hunt for references. But, they reminded me of the hundreds of hours that I have wasted on stupid movies. Parts of *Ready Player One* deliberately look like the '80s and '90s movies that I wish I could forget: "Howard the Duck," "Judge Dredd," "Highlander 2," "Child's Play," "Gremlins," "They Live," "Dune," "Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure"… the list here could go on longer than the voiceovers in this movie.

Ready Player One is a CGI-laden homage to those forgettable movies, loving them while leaving the poor proles in their trailers to perpetually escape into the Oasis. But, if the Oasis is a celebration of stupid 1980s B-movies, it's the most elaborate version of pop-culture hell ever created.

(Note: lest I be accused of pretension, I can recommend a vast number of movies that appear to be stupid, or are about stupid people. Begin with "Spinal Tap" and "Waiting for Guffman." Then, anything by Mike Judge. In his overlooked satire "Idiocracy," an intentionally stupid movie about stupid people, Judge satirizes the kind of futuristic dystopia filled with escapist peons that *Ready Player One* doesn't care anything about.)