

ANALYZING THE FACT/VALUE DICHOTOMY IN READY PLAYER ONE: THE MOVIE

Charlotte Thomason on the Potential
Consequences of Virtual Reality and Video
Games

In *The Art of Ready Player One*, Gina McIntyre describes *Ready Player One* as, “many things... [including] a sophisticated social commentary, and a cautionary tale.”¹ As a social commentary, Steven Spielberg’s film adaptation of Ernest Cline’s best seller, *Ready Player One* mirrors the decline of significant interpersonal interaction found in the world in 2018. As a cautionary tale, *Ready Player One* predicts a probable outcome of society’s increased interest in virtual reality and video games.

¹ Gina McIntyre, Ernest Cline, and Steven Spielberg, *The Art of Ready Player One* (San Rafael, CA: Insight Editions, 2018), 51

Ready Player One takes place in 2045, when relationships in the real world are broken or non-existent as players spend most of their time in the OASIS, a multiplayer virtual reality (VR) online game. The division between the real-world persona of the characters and their avatar (their online persona in the OASIS) mirrors the fact/value dichotomy discussed by Nancy Pearcey In *Total Truth, Study Guide Edition*. She argues, “The reason it is so important for us to learn how to recognize this division [fact/value dichotomy] is that it is the single most potent weapon for delegitimizing the biblical perspective in the public square today.”²

Francis A. Schaeffer introduced the concept of the fact/value dichotomy in books like *God Who is There, He is There and He is Not Silent*, and *Escape from Reason*. While Schaeffer used the image of a two-story building to illustrate the dichotomy, Pearcey continued Schaeffer’s critique to describe our current fragmented society.³ *Ready Player One* illustrates the underlying principles of Nancy Pearcey’s discussion of the fact/value dichotomy -- facts are divided from values; facts are science, and

² Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity*, Study Guide Edition (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 21.

³ *Ibid.* 18

values are personal preferences -- through the characters, the dual settings and the interaction between the characters as they navigate between the two worlds.

A discussion of *Ready Player One* requires understanding several terms that are used in the film when describing the interaction between the characters, the two realities and the themes of the story. The movie alternates between two worlds, the OASIS (value) and dystopian Columbus, Ohio (fact.) The OASIS (Ontologically Anthropocentric Sensory Immersive Simulation) is a MMOSG (massively multiplayer online simulation game) created by James Halliday and Ogden Morrow of Gregarious Simulation Systems. The Stacks, located in downtown Columbus, Ohio consists of trailers, vans and RVs stacked on top of each other, supported by pipes and metal scaffolding. Wade Watts, the primary protagonist, lives in the Stacks.

The primary goal of players within the OASIS is finding Halliday's Easter egg (an inside joke, hidden message, or secret feature of the video game). Once the quest for Halliday's Easter egg commences, the participants in the hunt include Gunters, a contraction for egg hunter, and the Sixers, who are employed by IOI (Innovative Online Industries).

Nolan Sorrento, the primary antagonist in the movie, owns IOI. With his vast resources, Sorrento forms the Oology department. Oologists are experts on video games both past and present. Loyalty Centers are real-world debtors' prisons that virtually connect prisoners to forced labor camps in the OASIS.

The fact/value dichotomy is embedded in the storyline, characters, and setting of *Ready Player One*. The action of the film occurs both in the OASIS (value) and the real world (fact). At the beginning of the film, the two worlds are completely divided. Wade navigates the Stacks to get to his van where his VR equipment is stored. As he navigates down the Stacks, we see the residents with VR goggles and the scenes alternate between their avatar in the OASIS and their existence in the real world. As Wade enters the OASIS, his avatar, Parzival, states, "you can do everything except eat and sleep and go to the bathroom in the OASIS," and that is the only time anyone leaves. Wade's observation supports the idea that while a person must return to the real world to take care of the body, doing so does not affect the person's virtual identity.⁴

⁴ *Ready Player One*, directed by Steven Spielberg, (United States: Warner Bros. Pictures, 2018), Xfinity on demand, accessed October 14 2018

Ready Player One propels the audience forward to the year 2045 where 100% of households spend an average of 19 hours each day in the OASIS, where, as Wade Watts confesses at the beginning of the film, “people come . . . because of what they can do but stay because of what they can be.”⁵ The world of 2045 resembles the warning in Neil Postman’s, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*,

When the population becomes distracted by trivia, when cultural life is redefined as a perpetual round of entertainments, when serious public conversation becomes a form of baby-talk, when in shorts, a people become an audience and their public business a vaudeville act, then a nation finds itself at risk; culture-death is a clear possibility.⁶

Players sacrifice family, finances, and security to find Halliday’s Easter egg. When gamers are in the game, real-world problems cease to exist. The conditions in the Stacks, their broken relationships, and their debt vanish as they imagine they will be the Gunter who wins the quest. The person’s ability to maintain the fact/value dichotomy disappears

⁵ *Ready Player One*, directed by Steven Spielberg.

⁶ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 2006), 156.

when an avatar dies in the OASIS and the system empties all the resources from their in-game account. Sorrento then sends F'Nale Zandor to collect what the character owes. Most individuals cannot pay the debt, so Zandor places the person in a Loyalty Center. Prisoners in the Loyalty Centers are prisoners in the real world and the OASIS. IOI controls every aspect of the prisoner's life in both worlds.

Several characters in *Ready Player One* illustrate aspects of the fact/value dichotomy. Zandor is the only character that does not have an avatar. She despises virtual reality and makes a statement to Sorrento that she does what he will not do. She mirrors those who promote the idea that biology has nothing to do with beliefs. Zandor is a perfect representation of a modernist because she is grounded in science, real-world interaction and does not exist in the OASIS.

In contrast, I-Rok is Sorrento's right-hand man within the OASIS. I-Rok mirrors a postmodernist because he is the only major character whose real-world identity remains hidden throughout the film. Although I-Rok is a villain, he is a likable villain. While his physical appearance is terrifying, his personality is endearing. In *The Art of Ready Player One*, co-screenwriter, Zak Penn, describes I-Rok,

“He’s clearly some sort of overgrown man-child in the real world, but all we see of him is this enormous, frightening avatar that looks like someone overcompensating.”⁷ While Nolan Sorrento has an avatar, his OASIS persona mirrors his real-world existence. In *The Art of Ready Player One*, author, Gina McIntyre writes, “[Sorrento] would have little interest in disguising his identity . . . He would have just gone for this super tough version of himself in the OASIS.”⁸ The three characters, Zandor, I-Rok, and Sorrento personify the underlying principles of the fact/value dichotomy.

Several scenes of *Ready Player One* demonstrate the difficulty in preserving the fact/value dichotomy. At the beginning of the movie, Parzival states that the OASIS is where he found his friends. Later in the film, when Parzival reveals his real-world name to Art3mis and declares his love for her, Art3mis shouts, “You never reveal your real name or where you live in the real world . . . there are “real world consequences . . . You live inside this illusion . . . I cannot let you distract me.”⁹ Art3mis’s statement shows us that perhaps she has not completely

⁷ Gina McIntyre, Ernest Cline, and Steven Spielberg, *Ready Player One*, 46.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁹ *Ready Player One*, directed by Steven Spielberg

separated her biological body from the virtual body. Parzival's confession jolts her out of the value arena and into the fact arena.

Although Art3mis/Samantha is initially angry, she later "kidnaps" Wade and has him brought to the rebel hideout. However, I-Rok, Sorrento's right-hand man in the OASIS, overhears the conversation and gives the information to Sorrento's avatar. Sorrento relays the information to Zandor who uses the information to find Wade in the real world. Ultimately, Sorrento attempts to recruit Wade to play the game for IOI by bringing Parzival to IOI as a hologram, but when Parzival refuses, Sorrento destroys Wade's home, killing his aunt. Before Parzival's confession, the virtual personalities created in the OASIS (values) did not intersect with their real-world counterparts (facts). After the interaction, the real world (fact) collides with the virtual world (values).

As a social commentary, *Ready Player One* mirrors society's current obsession with technology, particularly video games. In *Byline Manual*, Carie Lemack argues,

The truth is that this isn't a dystopian future but a reality we live with today: We often ignore the natural world around us because we are consumed by tech, our

heads buried in our smartphones, VR goggles, computers and whatever other notifications we are receiving other than the ones coming from the real world surrounding us.¹⁰

According to a study referenced by Johanna Roettl, “The video game industry is one of the fastest-growing industries. The global value for the video games market is expected to grow from almost USD 71 billion in 2015 to about USD 90 billion in 2020.”¹¹ ¹² The article continues, “At least one person in more than 60% of US American households, plays video games on a regular basis, doing so for at least 3 hours per week, and 65% of US American households own at least one device which is capable of playing video games.”¹³ The growing

¹⁰ Byline Manual, “‘Ready Player One’ Has an Important Message About Not Just Virtual Reality, But Reality Itself,” *Space.com*, last modified April 20, 2018, accessed October 14, 2018, <https://www.space.com/40355-ready-player-one-virtual-reality.html>.

¹¹ Johanna Roettl and Ralf Terlutter, “The same video game in 2D, 3D or virtual reality – How does technology impact game evaluation and brand placements?” *PLoS One* 13, no. 7 (2018), accessed October 01, 2018, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6054385/>.

¹² As cited in Johanna Roettl and Ralf Terlutter. “Value of the global video games market from 2011 to 2020 (in billion U.S. dollars)” *Statista*, 2018, accessed October 1, 2018, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/246888/value-of-the-global-video-game-market/>

¹³ “Essential Facts: About the computer and video game

interest and amount of participation in video games validate Neil Postman's warning, "Before our very eyes, technology has altered every aspect of life in America."¹⁴

The technology available today allows individuals to create avatars, bitmojis, and GIFs to communicate with friends and family. Virtual connections already replace real-world connections. Players in the OASIS purchase gear, artifacts, and coins within the game and the real world. Real world gear includes haptic suits gear which allows the wearer to connect to the OASIS and physically experience what the avatar experiences. The technology depicted in the movie already exists. Haptic gear is available from multiple companies including Tesla suit, NullspaceVR, Haptika, Axon VR and others.¹⁵ The companies' ads resemble the ads for IOI gear in *Ready Player One*. One company sells the Rapture Vest which resembles the platform used by the Sixers in the War Room. The vest is

October 1, 2018, <http://essentialfacts.theesa.com/Essential-Facts-2016.pdf>

¹⁴ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 157.

¹⁵ Pierre PitaPierre and World.Virtual Reality Times, "List of Full Body Virtual Reality Haptic Suits," *Virtual Reality Times*, last modified February 28, 2017, accessed October 18, 2018, <https://virtualrealitytimes.com/2017/02/28/list-of-full-body-virtual-reality-haptic-suits/>

specifically made for *The Void*, a virtual reality game that promises,

A whole-body, fully immersive VR experience, full of surprises at every turn; with you, your family and friends inside the action. One second, you're standing on solid ground, the next you're stepping deep into darkness, looking at unimaginable beauty – or fending off danger from another realm.¹⁶

As is common for companies to create video games based on popular movies, Vive Studios recently released a beta version of *The OASIS* on Steam, promotes, “In the OASIS, you can go anywhere, do anything, be anyone — the only limits of reality are your own imagination.”¹⁷ The promotional video shows various scenes from the movie which indicates the beta version does not allow players to create individual scenarios but players can create a unique avatar and participate in pre-programmed adventures. The multiple examples of current technology supports statement

¹⁶ “Step Beyond Reality,” *The VOID*, accessed October 18, 2018, <https://www.thevoid.com/>

¹⁷ “Play Ready Player One: OASIS Beta,” Ready Player One: OASIS Beta on Steam, accessed October 18, 2018, https://store.steampowered.com/app/779650/Ready_Player_One_OASIS_beta/

that the virtual world created in *Ready Player One* is a realistic portrayal of society's race toward total immersion in virtual reality.

As Marshall McLuhan argues in *Understanding Media*, "Any game, like any medium of information, is an extension of the individual or the group. Its effect on the group or individual is a reconfiguring of the parts of the group or individual that are not so extended."¹⁸ The quality of the player's physical experience depends on the quality of the haptic gear. For most Gunters in the movie, the disparity in gear places them at a disadvantage in the quest for Halliday's Easter egg. While society's current obsession with video games does not lead to incarceration in a Loyalty Center, according to Statista, Americans spent over 36 billion dollars on video games in 2017.¹⁹

Jesus used parables to teach life lessons and eternal life lessons. He used familiar objects, stories, and characters to explain complex ideas. The dystopian world in *Ready Player One* achieves a

¹⁸ Marshall McLuhan and W. Terrence. Gordon, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Berkeley, CA: Gingko Press, 2015), 263, Digital Edition.

¹⁹ Felix Richter, "Infographic: Americans Spent \$36 Billion on Video Games in 2017," *Statista Infographics*, last modified June 12, 2018, accessed October 19, 2018, <https://www.statista.com/chart/9838/consumer-spending-on-video-games/>

similar goal by creatively depicting the fact/value dichotomy through the characters, events and setting of the movie. The setting of the film is only a few decades in the future, and much of the technology depicted in *Ready Player One* exists today. People may view the movie because they liked the book, because Spielberg directed it, or because they love video games and virtual reality. However, many viewers will engage in a conversation about the movie. The movie provides a perfect backdrop for discussing the fact/value dichotomy through the events and characters in the story, resulting in meaningful dialog about the possible outcomes of the belief that facts and value must remain separate.

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