

Ready Player One bets on nostalgia, loses

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: «« out of «««««

Running Time: 140 minutes

Maybe I'm getting old. Or perhaps I'm just in a grouchy mood this week. *Ready Player One* is a fantasy film and homage to the 1980s that should have been tailor made for me. It even comes from director Steven Spielberg, the man who made many of the films that helped me foster a love for cinema. Yet in this particular film, the overall effect is a little flat. The movie certainly has its share of entertaining sequences, but it feels like an obvious attempt to curry nostalgia at the expense of delivering a strong message about its subject matter.

Set in a dystopian future, the story follows teenager Wade Watts (Tye Sheridan). His normal life is certainly depressing, living with his aunt in a community of stacked trailers and taking refuge in a massive virtual reality universe known as the OASIS. Taking the online persona of Percival, Wade sets out to solve a mystery. Upon his death, OASIS creator James Halliday (Mark Rylance) set up a series of clues and challenges leading to a trio of hidden keys. Whoever completes the mission will be rewarded beyond their wildest imagination. The hero teams with online friends like Art3mis (Olivia Cooke) to collect the keys, but they find themselves pursued by the IOI corporation and its sinister head Sorrento (Ben Mendelsohn), who wants control of OASIS.

Early sections of the film feature a lot of action and techno-babble within the OASIS as the online avatars are introduced. Of course, many of the background characters have the appearance of pop culture characters from movies, television and video games. Beyond simply recognizing them (they are often accompanied with exposition from the leads about who they

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are), there isn't much more to the experience for audiences. The heroic avatars like Percival aren't photorealistic, which also initially takes one out of the experience.

Of course, after all of the set-up, things do improve and there are a couple of enjoyable sequences. This director is a master of shooting action and the later scenes are very well handled. The movie's best moment involves a trip inside the Overlook Hotel from the 1980 film, *The Shining*

, as the heroes enter the establishment to hunt down a key. Clearly, Spielberg is feeding on his own nostalgia for the Kubrick film and his enthusiasm here is infectious. The bit isn't scary at all, but features impressive visual trickery and humor as the leads experience some of the film's iconic moments first-hand. And the climax is appropriately epic as factions come to battle at the site of the final key.

However, for this reviewer the online sequences don't feel as exciting as they should. We are always well aware as viewers that we're watching avatars in a video game and as such it doesn't seem as life-threatening if their fake personas are wiped out. The story does attempt to add some real world drama in the second half of the feature as Sorrento sets out to hurt the real life players. These bits do play better, but in general many scenes lack a much needed element of danger.

And the movie itself doesn't seem to want to say a whole lot about the potential issues at hand. The world is in a shabby state and the OASIS is an escape, but these kids don't have much on their minds besides preserving their online personas. And the screenplay doesn't want to deal directly with these themes. There's a lot that could be addressed here about escapism, addiction and its effects on the world, but the movie is more interested in trotting out pop culture references.

Indeed, there are a couple of awkward comments like, "Reality is real," but that's as overtly philosophic as things get. There's a moment late in the movie where a character has the option of wiping out the entire online universe... and no one in the room even considers it for a moment. After all is said and done, the solution is presented in an upbeat manner, even though it hardly seems like an improvement. Some might perceive this as commentary and I may be misreading it, but I honestly don't think the intent was to critique the actions and decisions of its heroic characters.

So in the end, this reviewer found the movie technically impressive and enjoyed some fun bits

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and pieces here and there. Yet, the effect of *Ready Player One* is a bit hollow and ultimately less than the sum of its parts. Like watching a friend play a video game for two and a half hours, the overall experience just isn't as enthralling as hoped for.

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