

Steven Spielberg's Ready Player One improves immensely on the book

Fans tend to either love or hate Ernest Cline's bestselling 2011 novel *Ready Player One*. There are legitimate reasons for both reactions. On the love side: it's a light, airy pop confection, crammed with familiar cultural references, which Cline recontextualizes in surprising ways. On the hate side: the prose can be extremely clumsy, as it is in this paragraph where teenage protagonist Wade Watts describes the virtual car he constructed for himself in the vast online world where he spends most of his waking hours:

The DeLorean came outfitted with a (nonfunctioning) flux capacitor, but I'd made several additions to its equipment and appearance. First, I'd installed an artificially intelligent onboard computer named KITT (purchased in an online auction) into the dashboard, along with a matching red Knight Rider scanner just above the DeLorean's grill. Then I'd outfitted the car with an oscillation overthruster, a device that allowed it to travel through solid matter. Finally, to complete my '80s super-vehicle theme, I'd slapped a Ghostbusters logo on each of the DeLorean's gull-wing doors, then added personalized plates that read ECT0-88.

That's a lot of awkward verbiage to say two pretty basic things: people in virtual reality can express their personal tastes through their avatars in hyper-specific ways, and Cline is so obsessed with the culture of the 1980s – the geek-fodder of his youth – that he thinks it's compelling even in the form of a shopping list. The book is a fast-paced adventure, but this kind of unwieldy lump of mix-and-match nostalgia acts as a roadblock. There's no attempt to consider why Wade finds

these specific objects appealing, out of the billion options available to him. The book assumes up front that readers find everything in this list as unbearably cool as Cline does, and that just running down an exhaustive list of Wade's favorite things is enough to make him appealing, relatable, and enviable.

Steven Spielberg's new film adaptation of *Ready Player One* prominently features that same car, but in a context that improves it immensely. Spielberg doesn't have Wade talk audiences through it, and he doesn't spell out the references. He just slaps the car down in the middle of a tremendous early action scene, where it's prominent, distinctive, and memorable. Fans who want the full nostalgia trip, who want to wring every Easter egg out of the experience, will eventually be able to pause the movie and frame-by-frame through it, looking for the flux capacitor on the dashboard, checking the plates, and scanning for extra bonus material. But in the middle of the action, even to people who've never seen the *Back to the Future* movies and aren't vibing on the connection, the car doesn't need explaining. It's just a sleek piece of visual energy, one breathless element among dozens of others. It's not a citation or a list. It's an effortless, integrated piece of the action.

[embedded content]

That dynamic stretches throughout *Ready Player One*, scripted by Cline and *X-Men: The Last Stand* writer Zak Penn, and directed by Spielberg as a whiplash-fast tear through a world-spanning, all-encompassing video game. The story, which mostly takes place in the virtual-reality world called The OASIS, rarely slows down enough to explain the references, or geek out over them the way the book does. It's still a visual festival of '80s culture that sometimes hinges significant jokes on the assumption that the audience knows the filmography of Robert Zemeckis, or will chortle over a reference to *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. But the film

improves significantly on the book by prioritizing the story over the signifiers. The hardcore pop-culture crowd that is this movie's ultimate intended audience will have plenty to pore over and pick apart in this film. But the story moves briskly enough, and with enough giant-sized, screen-friendly excitement, that it doesn't feel like it's aimed solely and specifically at them.

Some of that speed comes at the expense of artistry. *Ready Player One* opens by laboriously climbing a mountain of voiceover, explaining the setting: the year is 2045, and the world is terrible. Most people live in depressing poverty, and spend as much time as possible jacked into the fantasy world of the OASIS. There, they can be and do anything they want, or at least anything they can afford to buy with coins won in the universe's eternally running video game arenas. The OASIS was created by reclusive genius James Halliday (*Bridge of Spies*' Mark Rylance), who packed it with his own favorite culture. When he died, he created a three-part quest within the world, linked to his favorite films and games, but also tied to his own past regrets and frustrations. Whoever finds the three keys he's hidden within the game world, and the ultimate Easter egg they unlock, will get full control of OASIS and Halliday's vast fortune.

The quest has created a subclass of "egg-hunters," or "Gunters" – quest-obsessives whose full-time occupation is hunting down the keys. It's also created an evil dystopian megacorp, run by former Halliday intern Nolan Sorrento (Ben Mendelsohn, of *Rogue One* and *Starred Up*), and devoted to gaining control of the OASIS to commercialize it. Wade (*X-Men: Apocalypse*'s Tye Sheridan) and his fellow Gunters – particularly too-cool-for-school solo hunter Art3mis (Olivia Cooke, also currently starring in the chilling *Thoroughbreds*) and Wade's big mechanical buddy Aech (*Master of None*'s Lena Waithe) – all want the keys and the egg for their own personal reasons, though those are barely articulated.

Cline's book assumes everyone will know a DeLorean is cool; Spielberg's film assumes the same thing about a teenage protagonist who loves playing video games. Wade (or Parzival, as he's known in the OASIS) eventually develops an ethos, but for the most part, he's like every other video gamer who's ever sat down on a couch and hit "start" on the controller. He may appreciate the gameplay or the storyline or the people he meets online, but ultimately, he just wants that elusive win. He's more a customized audience avatar than a real character, but that's fitting for a world that's so spottily drawn, at least outside of the virtual paradise where people prefer to spent their time.



Image: Warner Bros

The film version of *Ready Player One* has some major advantages over the book. The exposition is just as bald, but once it's done, Spielberg can focus on the endless dynamism of a world where anything is possible. As Wade and others follow their

quest through races, battles, and puzzles, they encounter a dizzying blur of visual references that act as “Hey, remember this?” in-jokes with the audience, including some major ones that weren’t in the book. But the filmmakers also delve into Halliday’s past and his wounded psyche, in a way that gradually becomes a little touching and tragic. (A conversation with Halliday’s online avatar closely recalls a similar scene with Professor Falken in *WarGames*, and carries the same sense of melancholy.) The film also goes further than the book in laying out why Halliday’s retreat into a fantasy world wasn’t necessarily good for anyone – especially not for Halliday himself. No matter how validating the onscreen gags are, they’re still a reminder of a man who found more emotional resonance in *Jurassic Park*’s T-Rex than in a connection with a living human being.

The film inevitably has its cake and eats it too when it comes to addressing wish-fulfillment fantasy and delirious nostalgia: the story can only push so far in sorrowing over Halliday’s surrender and retreat from the world, while still turning every rambunctious game setpiece into a celebration of Cline’s favorite culture. *Ready Player One* is so heavily inspired by and inflected with the broad, black-and-white morality of ‘80s geek culture that any attempt to find the gray areas feels slightly daring, even as it feels slightly out of place. Given that Sorrento is a buttoned-down, stony-faced idea-thief of an evil overlord, straight out of *Tron*, there’s not a lot of room for narrative nuance in this story. But at least Cline and Penn make the effort, acknowledging some of the biggest complaints leveled at Cline’s book, and trying to take the story a little deeper.

The film version does carry over some of the book’s most notable flaws, especially a suspicious reliance on narrative convenience and coincidence. The characters are thinly drawn, and most of them are little more than cool avatars and signature moves. There’s no sense that anyone involved with

the story really cares about the details of the real world in this crapsack future, given how little the real-world scenes hold together. And the film takes a particularly feather-light approach to what should be significant emotions, especially when a death that should devastate Wade is shrugged off within seconds, then brought back out for a cheap, unearned moment much later. Spielberg's signature sentiment is operating in full force, as he builds up one highly symbolic confrontation solely for the feelings of triumph and justice it creates, and then has it come to exactly nothing. And in places, the story jumps forward so quickly that it feels like necessary connective scenes are simply missing.



Courtesy of Warner Bros.

Unequivocally, the film's biggest problem is the half-assed love story between Wade and Art3mis, which operates on approximately 75 percent wish-fulfillment and 25 percent apathetic inevitability. When they first encounter each other, Wade is starstruck: he knows Art3mis from her online cool-girl rep, and watching her in action, he sees her as an über-badass with leet skillz and an appealingly punk devil-may-care attitude. It's a short, shocking jump from there to him telling her he loves her. What follows should be important and telling – she reminds him that they don't know each other,

that he's seeing an online avatar and a mental picture he's largely invented. (And, of course, he thinks they're perfect for each other because she gets his references.)

But the film never follows through on that mature and useful point. The insta-relationship that develops between them is as inauthentic and insulting as the central romance in Edgar Wright's *Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World*, without any of the sense of irony or intentionality. It's bad enough to follow the "hero wins the girl as a prize" model without examining it at all. It's worse still to have the characters examine it, find the flaws, then instantly forget about them. This isn't a movie with a long memory (except when it's reaching back 40 years for visual gags), but it's infuriating to see it try to examine its own tropes responsibly, then take no steps whatsoever to address the issues it raises.

And yet, when Wade is in his kitted-out DeLorean, tearing along a preposterously difficult game racetrack, menaced by King Kong and dodging flying debris as his fellow racers crash and burn, very little of that matters. The sheer dynamism and energy of the movie are compelling, even when the character drama isn't. The action scenes are deliberately overclocked and overwhelming, turning Wade's quest into a thrilling blur of fast-paced decisions and the endorphin-rush highs of a good gaming experience. More importantly, the film is overtly funny in ways that constantly remind the audience that there are people behind the game avatars, and specifically people who are sometimes young, self-absorbed, immature, and caught up in their own created self-images of badassery. The human frailties behind the game avatars is a reliable well of humor for *Ready Player One*, and the script takes full, hilarious advantage.

And while the film's real world gets left behind in the rush, the attention to detail during the OASIS scenes is absolutely astounding – not just the details Cline salivated over on the page, like that *Knight Rider* scanner in the grill of Wade's

car, but the subtle nuances, like the way Wade's avatar constantly seems to be standing in a flattering breeze that ruffles his hair in the most winsome way possible, or the way Art3mis' too-big anime eyes catch the light. The uncanny-valley effect is strong in these game avatars, but Spielberg uses it to his advantage, reminding his audience at every moment that what they're seeing is mostly a fantasy, created by people who see image as almost everything. It's a slick, sleek, surface fantasy, for sure. But for people who share Cline's worldview, or identify with gamer culture in general, it's an immense hit of validation and acknowledgement, delivered with joyful abandon and unmissable enthusiasm. All those feelings of love and obsession came through clearly on the page. But on the screen, they're bigger and better, because they're so much more intense, and so much closer to the memorable images that turned Cline into an obsessive in the first place.

This review was initially published after Ready Player One's premiere at the 2018 SXSW festival in Austin, Texas. The film arrives in theaters on March 29th, 2018.

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