"THEY STAY BECAUSE OF ALL THE THINGS THEY CAN BE": AVATARS AS FANS IN A VIRTUAL FUTURE

Review by Alison Tedman

Spielberg, Steven, director. *Ready Player One*. Performance by Tye Sheridan, Olivia Cook, Ben Mendelsohn, Lena Waithe, T.J. Miller, Simon Pegg. Warner Bros. Pictures, Dune Entertainment, Amblin Entertainment, 2018. Film.

In directing the screen adaptation of Ernest Cline's popular novel *Ready Player One* (2011), based on Cline's and Zak Penn's screenplay, Steven Spielberg creates a gamified Action Adventure that like its source positions Science Fiction (SF) and Fantasy fans as protagonists and as implied audience. As in the novel, the film's striking features are its virtual reality environment – the OASIS – and the extensive diegetic citing of SF, Fantasy and, here, Horror. Novel and film display topical discourses of nostalgia for 1980s culture and for 'retro' media technology. There are clearly changes through adaptation: game tasks in the quest are replaced, emphasising action spectacle over the ability to recount 1980s film dialogue. Unsurprisingly, the film's implied demographic is younger as evidenced by the inclusion of recent, cult game and film characters. Yet, it stands as a successful fantasy in its own right and as a crucial contribution to the body of films that depict virtual reality.

We are introduced to the OASIS through Wade Watts (Tye Sheridan), a teenager living in precarious, vertical trailer park (the Stacks) in 2045 Columbus, Ohio. As Wade heads to his old van, he passes headset-wearing inhabitants whose mimed performances indicate everything from virtual boxing to piano-playing. Eschewing its role in more Dystopian films, virtual reality is used proactively for entertainment and other aspects of daily life. After Wade tests his VR rig and multi-directional treadmill, a swirling, virtual track takes us from his visor through the OASIS' colourful, dynamic worlds – including *Minecraft World* – to his avatar: Parzival. We learn, through flashbacks and Wade's unusually extended voice-over, of the competition announced in the Will of reclusive OASIS co-creator James Halliday (Mark Rylance). Players must solve clues, find three keys, and reach the Golden Easter egg: Halliday's fortune and control of the OASIS. Parzival initially quests separately from virtual friends Aech (Lena Waithe), Daito, and Sho, but the narrative validates teamwork that includes Parzival's crush – experienced gamer Art3mis/Samantha (Olivia Cooke). Appropriately, in the context of contemporary media ownership concerns, the film's antagonist is a corporation, personified by Nolan Sorrento (Ben Mendelsohn) – CEO of I.O.I. (Innovative Online Industries) – who wields an army of uniformed gamers or 'Sixers' and experts (Oologists) with the aim of privatising the OASIS.

The first task, oft-failed by gunters (egg hunters), is a furious, retro-future race through shifting New York streets with Parzival racing in the *Back to the Future* (1985) DeLorean. We later see the race from a defamilarising grid perspective that evokes virtual Dystopian Science Fiction film *The Third Floor* (1999). The sequence establishes some of the film's gamified 'rules'. Swiping a virtual screen brings up purchased or hard-won artefacts which become three-dimensional miniatures before full-sized evoking collectables. When avatars are killed they shed accumulated wealth, echoing *Scott Pilgrim Versus the World* (2010). An earlier montage implies that loss of virtual wealth devastates real-world players economically, highlighting the interconnection between virtual spaces and social identities.

Paralleling the novel's abundant 1980s references but extending these from classical Hollywood (King Kong is a gigantic race antagonist) to 2010s super-heroes, the film creates intertexuality through dialogue, avatars, artefacts, and settings. Mechanically-skilled Aech owns a garage full of vehicles – from spaceships to the Tardis – and can repair or build virtually, as shown by an inventive heist. Aech's den, Halliday's childhood room, and other spaces contain posters, vinyl, and tie-in merchandise. In battle, the heroes clash with Sorrento in huge figures including the Iron Giant while memorabilia is used for humour (a weaponised 'Chucky' doll despatches multiple Sixers).

Intertextual citation in the film has, I suggest, a different function for the viewer than the book's reader. The novel elicits memory or offers new knowledge while the film enjoyably invites viewers to seek and catalogue minutiae. Here, as New Media theorists have argued of marketing culture, the film is constructed to emulate and co-opt fan behaviour. The result of such engagement can be seen online: for example, in David Crow's extensive and partly reader-sourced catalogue – "Ready Player One: Complete Easter Egg and Reference Guide" – on the website *Den of Geek* (2018). Two 2018 VR marketing promos of *Aech's Basement* and *Aech's Garage* were created by Sansar Studios for PC and Vive. Disembodied, translucent hands represent the user browsing annotated memorabilia.

Production of *Ready Player One* aptly drew on virtual filmmaking, motion capture, and game technologies. The OASIS, avatars, and real-world digital set extensions were respectively creatively pre-visualized or constructed by a barrage of effects companies, including ILM, with Adam Stockhausen as Production Designer. Joe Fordham presents a usefully comprehensive interview-sourced breakdown of contributors to the film's digital production in "Lightning in the Bottle" (2018). Sets were designed in virtual reality for Spielberg to choose locations and shots (92), using what Digital Domain term a "virtual-virtual camera," while virtual lighting and lenses were tailored for Spielberg and cinematographer Janusz Kaminski (97).

During the film, which is set predominantly in the OASIS, we engage with avatars as characters while occasional intercutting reminds us that they are performed extensions of players, rather than simulacra (Baudrillard "Simulations", 1983). The avatars' relatable quality was intended by Spielberg who privileged emotion and performance in motion capture (92). Body and facial

markers combined with technologies including 'witness cameras' to record performance, which informed digital animation (92). As ILM's Alex Jaeger states: "Steven wanted it to feel as if avatars could bleed" (100-101). This tension is borne out when Aech escapes a giant zombie's axe in the snow-bound maze in the part-replica, part horror mash-up of *The Shining* (1980). Avatars are not photorealistic humans. Their design process, involving Aaron Sims Creative then ILM, finalised Parzival as a floppy-haired youth who nervously tries on outfits for a date with Art3mis but has shimmering textured skin, while Daito is a Samurai with the face of Toshiro Mifune (100-101). Avatars can alter appearances (as when using 'Clark Kent glasses'). Photorealist representation is suggested within the OASIS, paradoxically, in 360-degree archive exhibits of 'footage' showing Halliday's childhood and his collaboration at Gregarious Games with Ogden Morrow (Simon Pegg).

The avatars convey a sense of 'presence' aspired to in real-world virtuality. Presence refers to users' belief in their virtual embodiment, a state that Jacqueline Ford Morie argues is hard to achieve given users' "dualistic state of Being" ("Performing in (Virtual) Spaces: Embodiment and Being in Virtual Environments," 2007, 128). Philosophical frameworks are often applied to virtuality and Melanie Chan's *Virtual Reality: Representations in Contemporary Media* (2010) offers useful consideration of many, including Baudrillard, and work on online identities. Pertinent to my argument is a slightly later theorisation of *Second Life* through performativity. In "Performing Embodied Identity in Virtual Worlds" (2014), Ulrike Schultze argues that repeated performed actions endow avatars with subjecthood. Here Parzival's repeated visits to the archive, and Aech's and Parzival's game banter, "First to the key! First to the egg!" concretise avatars' virtual identities and presence.

Many avatars seen in *Ready Player One* represent commercial franchises which raise questions about the constraining effect of copyright on design choices, yet indicate in a wider sense fans' use of memes and avatars for expression. Creatively othered online identities are also validated. Several avatars illustrate differences from users' gender or age and the capacity for such identities, when revealed, to precipitate offline friendship. Aech is designed as a masculinised, cyborg Minotaur with a deep, distorted voice belying the player's identity. In "(Re)defining the Gendered Body in Cyberspace: The Virtual Reality Film," Rocio Carrasco argues that "radical redefinitions of the human body are never present" in these narratives, although the "simulated body" may suggest, for example, "gender as a continuum" (2014, n.p.). Carrasco's discussion of action heroines could be extended to punk biker, Art3mis. Yet in Aech, motion capture offers post-humanity within the virtual reality narrative.

Ready Player One is notable for its normalised depiction of virtual reality, engaging with the ways in which millennial identities are, for Schultze and others, inextricably lived across both 'reality' and the Internet. Dystopian representations of virtuality – from *Welt Am Draht /World on a Wire* (1973) to Young Adult films – have raised questions about reality, ideology, and social identity. Focusing on 1990s films about virtual reality, Chan finds their stance on technology "complex and contradictory" revealing anxieties about immersion yet fed, unlike 1980s Cyberpunk, by optimism about the Internet and domestic virtual technology (59). *Ready Player One* was produced not quite in an era of mass domestic VR, yet post-2016, termed 'the year of virtual reality' by the press. As

such, it positions dystopia not through technophobia but in the threat of corporate control and monetisation. Virtual reality's communal use ("they stay because of all the things they can be," Wade notes) is near-utopian, in Spielberg's entertaining Action-adventure.

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