

Ready Player One Discussion Guide

By Sam Sessa

Leader Guide

Movie Themes:

Virtual Reality vs. Reality | Identity | Embodiment | Relationships

Introduction:

From RottenTomatoes.com:

In the year 2045, people can escape their harsh reality in the OASIS, an immersive virtual world where you can go anywhere, do anything, be anyone-the only limits are your own imagination. OASIS creator James Halliday left his immense fortune and control of the Oasis to the winner of a contest designed to find a worthy heir. When unlikely hero Wade Watts conquers the first challenge of the reality-bending treasure hunt, he and his friends-known as the High Five-are hurled into a fantastical universe of discovery and danger to save the OASIS and their world.

Ready Player One is based on the best-selling book of the same name. It deals with the struggles of Wade Watts as he tries to find identity and meaning in a dystopian future. For church leaders there are a few things to note.

The first is that the novel the movie is based on takes a strong atheist position with a very secular view of life. In the book, God is compared to Santa Claus and masturbation is lionized. In addition, the novel (and to a lesser extent the film) have been criticized recently for their portrayal of women. Specifically, the heroine, Art3mis, is seen as the prize for Wade's heroism. The film makes regular use of profanity so that it is probably on the upper-end of what is permissible in a PG-13 film. There are also sexual elements, especially a dance club scene where Art3mis is dressed in a provocative dress and titillates Wade through the feedback of his haptic suit. For all of these reasons, the wise leader will exercise discernment on whether this film is appropriate for their audience.

It may seem that this film is irredeemable based on the previous paragraph. In addition to concerns about its content, the film itself is mostly a shiny wrapper with little depth. But for all of these shortcomings, *Ready Player One* explores several important topics that are very relevant for today's audience, namely, embodiment and virtual reality.

Our society is glued to the miniature computers in their pockets. Social media has replaced face-to-face interaction and the promise of more connectedness has led to further isolation and depression. In a film that highlights how true and meaningful relationships only require your mind, it provides an excellent foil to the need for embodied relationships.

The second note is that there are two competing visions for this universe. The first is the author Ernest Cline's, who sees the OASIS as a dream come true for all geeks and nerds. You can live out your every fantasy from within the OASIS, the greatest video game experience of all time. The second vision is the director Steven Spielberg's, who sees how the OASIS becomes the drug of choice for humanity. For Spielberg, the OASIS doesn't solve the real problems that people face, but is only an escape. Perhaps this is best seen in the stakes for the conflict of the film. The villains want to take over the OASIS and introduce paid tiers and advertisements. The heroes are then trying to save the OASIS from ads. Meanwhile, the rest of humanity starves and lives in abject poverty, but those problems are not highlighted by our heroes.

Finally, this is a fun film with plenty of nostalgia and Easter eggs to find. The careful leader should try and appreciate the fun of the film with his audience but try and not get caught up in the window dressing.

Watching the Movie:

This guide can be used in multiple ways. The first is to watch the movie in its entirety and then host a discussion afterward. The benefit of this approach is that it will be the most entertaining and the simplest to execute. The down side is that the movie itself takes nearly 2.5 hours and any discussion on top of that will make for a very long event.

The second suggested way is to have everyone watch the film beforehand and then go through the discussion questions. This guide will provide both a chronological and thematic approach to the questions and you can choose the method that most appeals to your context.

Before you sit down to watch the movie, take out something to take notes with and write these two questions on it:

- What do I like most about this film?
- What do I like least about this film?

By taking notes throughout the film, even sparse notes, it will enrich and enliven the group discussion afterward. If you'd like, you can even go over the Group Discussion questions in brief beforehand so as to know what to look for while watching the film.

Group Discussion:

QUESTIONS PRESENTED CHRONOLOGICALLY

(hr:min:sec)

(0:00:35—0:21:50)

- How does the OASIS (the virtual reality system) distract people from their lives?
 - Point out how people are living in 2045 (living in mobile homes stacked on top of each other into dangerous sky scrapers) .

- The OASIS provides the ultimate escape from the despair of reality because it gives its own fully-immersive reality as a substitute.

Wade says about the OASIS, "People come to the OASIS for all the things they can do, but they stay for all the things they can be."

- What does this say about identity?
 - Identity is found in personal choice and preference. You can change every aspect of who you are and how you present yourself.
- What are some good aspects of how you can change your identity in the OASIS? What are some downsides?
 - Potential upsides include the ability to walk in other people's shoes. You can have a new appreciation for what it is like to be a different race or a different sex. You can also fulfill your wildest fantasies and even be a different kind of creature like an alien or horse. There is a lot of fun and learning opportunities to be had in the OASIS.
 - One of the biggest downsides is that you don't know who you are talking to. It could be a 300 lb. guy named Chuck who lives in his mom's basement! Perhaps the bigger danger is allowing a fake identity in the OASIS to become your truest identity. Our identity is found as baptized children of God and allowing anything else to take precedent over that is dangerous and sinful.
- What are some of the ways that the film portrays negative aspects of living a virtual life?
 - Mom ignores the fire her son created while cooking (0:06:35—0:06:45)
 - Man willing to commit suicide after his avatar dies (0:06:54—0:07:06)
 - Wade's aunt's boyfriend who gambled all their savings to try and win an artifact hunt (0:20:27—0:21:50)
 - Consistently, the best analogy of the OASIS is a drug. It addicts people who are seeking to escape from their reality. It causes parents to ignore their children, drives people to despair and financial ruin. It would be useful to highlight the downsides to the OASIS and use it as a warning for the addiction of escapism that our society suffers from.

(0:28:27—0:29:27)

- IOI is depicted as a faceless, evil corporation that is only concerned with making money. How many large companies do you think are like that in real life?
 - It would be useful to highlight how the companies that make our smartphones do not have our best interests at heart but are rather focused on increasing their bottom line.
 - You can bring up how large corporations operate in other countries, whether with child labor or near slave labor conditions in some countries. Would you

support working 16-hour days in order to support your family? Is this how you love your neighbor as yourself?

(0:40:30—0:42:06)

- How does Wade's attraction to Art3mis change his relationship with Aech? Do you agree with what he is doing and how he handled it?
 - Wade allows his attraction to the Art3mis persona to come between his relationship to Aech. In the book, their relationship becomes very rocky to the point where they don't even speak to each other anymore. In the movie, their relationship doesn't deteriorate as much.
 - This is good launching point to talk about how romantic relationships affect friendships.

(0:59:40—1:02:28)

- How does being physically present change the way Art3mis and Wade interact?
 - When they only knew each other in the OASIS, Art3mis didn't believe that Wade understood what it means to live in the real world. She says that Wade lives inside an illusion. But in the film once they are together in the real world, they are able to connect with each other in a very different way. Art3mis is able to trust Wade because she can be real with him, real in a way that can only occur in reality.

(1:02:36—1:11:55)

- Halliday regretted missing out on a chance of a relationship with Kira. How does the second challenge warn others against his mistake?
 - The premise of the second challenge is being willing to take a leap of faith. All relationships, both romantic and platonic, require courage. If you aren't willing to proverbially jump on the heads of zombies then you may not be ready to be in a relationship.

(1:56:54—1:59:06)

In the final test, Halliday gives Wade the opportunity to be the sole proprietor of the OASIS. Wade realizes that the contract is a test and refuses to sign. Halliday's biggest regret was pushing Ogden Morrow out of the company.

- Why would this be Halliday's biggest regret?
 - Halliday pushed his best friend, Ogden Morrow, out of the company so that he could maintain control of the OASIS. Morrow wanted there to be some level of limits on the OASIS because he was concerned that people were using it to escape from their problems. But after Halliday pushed out Morrow, he was alone. Halliday was afraid of having a relationship in the real world with people and this led him to have control and isolate himself.

- Halliday's search for control isolated him from others. What are some personal examples where you have isolated others?

(1:59:07—2:04:20)

In Halliday's childhood bedroom, he tells Wade how he allowed fear to rule his life. In the ultimate payoff of the film, Halliday says:

"I created the Oasis because I never felt at home in the real world. I just didn't know how to connect with the people there. I was afraid for all my life. Right up until the day I knew my life was ending. Now, that...that was when I realized that, as terrifying and painful as reality can be, it's also the only place you can get a decent meal. Because reality is real. Do you understand what I am saying?"

- He asks Wade, "Do you understand what I am saying?" What is Halliday saying?
 - Virtual reality is fun, but in the end, it doesn't mean a thing. It doesn't matter if you have the highest score, or a max level player, virtual reality is ultimately a shadow world. Whereas, reality has concrete meaning.
 - Ultimately, only Christ imbues something with meaning. Everything is meaningless without Christ, but with Him, everything has meaning. This is an excellent jumping off point of exploring how Christ gives meaning to our vocations and eternal significance to our actions.
- How can fear of reality cause us to live in illusion?
 - Halliday was deathly afraid of intimacy. He couldn't be real in any of his relationships. He referred to the love of his life by her gamer tag rather than her name. His fear dictated that he needed an intermediary in order to connect and he used virtual reality as that buffer. But when you build walls, you end up building a prison rather than a fortress. Halliday died alone because he didn't open up and develop relationships with others.
 - We can use sports, video games, social media, or any number of things to hide behind. Fear of being hurt, fear of being let down, fear of being rejected causes us to put up false fronts and never let anyone in. Whether we wear these masks online or in-person, they lead to loneliness and despair. Encourage your participants to find someone they can be real with.

QUESTIONS PRESENTED THEMATICALLY

Virtual Reality vs. Reality

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