

This is not a series about games you haven't heard of. This is a series about games EVERYONE has heard of. Games that everyone has an opinion on, regardless of whether they've played them or not. Games whose actual qualities have been buried in a narrative, whether good or bad. Games that everyone always makes the exact same comments about. Games that are in desperate need of...a Second Opinion.

I work for a gaming website. I write about games. When we don't write about games, we have a harder time sharing our content. For example: we were told we couldn't share *Welcome To Warcraft*, a show about why WoW has some of the worst-written lore of all time, on sites like N4G because the moderators there weren't convinced it was videogame-related enough. This led to that show doing extremely poorly and eventually getting cancelled.

I'm telling you this because I need you to understand that bashing *Ready Player One* is not an especially savvy move on my part. Far from being "clickbait," this video is likely to make us much *less* money than it would if I had simply stuck to videogames. But with the release of last week's trailer for the film and the subsequent disembark of the Hype Train, I felt this video was important. Because, you see, I don't just dislike *Ready Player One*. I don't just think it was a good idea that could have been done better in the hands of a competent writer or that it just lacked depth or any of the other "negative takes" written by cowards in a cowardly industry. I fucking despise *Ready Player One*, and consider it easily one of the worst books ever written, a piece of art that fails on every possible level, and which represents the absolute worst of nerd culture.

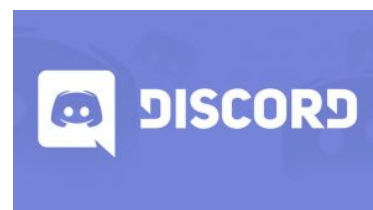
This isn't a Second Opinion. This is a reckoning.

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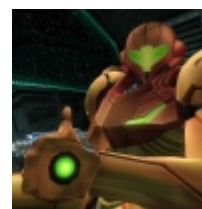
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Click the icon above to join our Discord! Ask a Mod or staff member to make you a member to see all the channels.



(<https://www.heypoorplayer.com/2017/12/things-video-game-journalists/>)



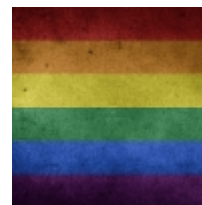
(https://www.heypoorplayer.com/2016/12/15/hpp-christmas-shopping-guide-2016/ready_player_one/)

This will come as a surprise to absolutely no one, but I'm extremely passionate about the area of entertainment we collectively refer to as "nerd culture." I like comic books, I like superheroes, I like Edgar Wright films – and most of all, I like videogames. What's more, I've been privileged enough to make decent money here and there writing for and about these things, along with making videos, hosting podcasts, et cetera. And while I love my work, it does come with some unfortunate side effects, and chief among those side effects is the fact that people expect me to have read and enjoyed *Ready Player One*.

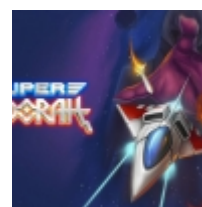
I have read *Ready Player One* – in fact, I've done so twice. But – and I'd like to officially nominate the following sentence for "Understatement Of The Year 2017" – I have *not* enjoyed it.

For those who live in blissful ignorance, *Ready Player One* is a 2011 novel written by Ernest Cline, who looks exactly like what you think he looks like. Actually, through "written by" is a pretty generous attribution. Let me try again.

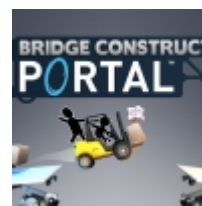
Ready Player One is a 2011 novel that lifts its setting, premise, and most of its story beats from 1992's *Snow Crash*, removes all of the self-awareness, badass action, and philosophical musings on the nature of the relationship between language and technology, replaces them with painfully awkward 80s references, and changes the main character from a samurai pizza deliveryman and freelance hacker to the asshole kid in your friend group who claimed he "didn't need showers," vomited onto the page by Ernest Cline. Its bestseller success and Cline's subsequent 7-figure sale of the screenplay to Steven Spielberg is as close as we can get to objective proof that the meritocracy isn't working.



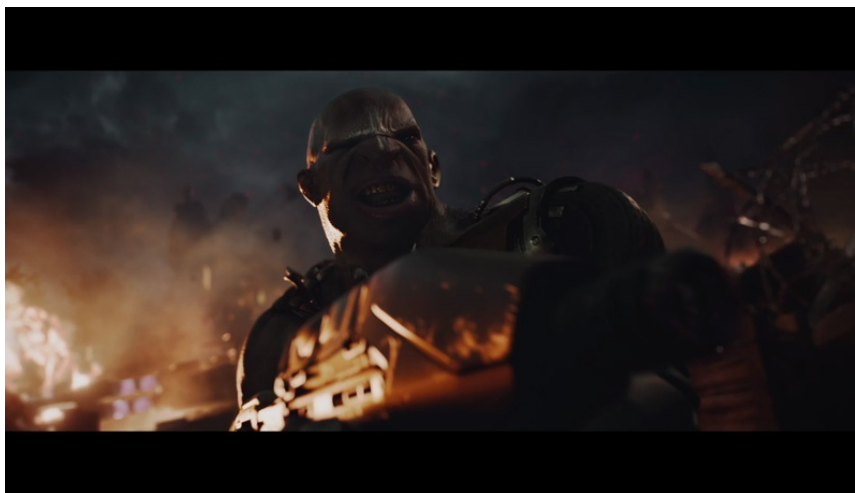
(<https://www.heypoorplayer.com/2017/12-5-lgbt-characters-gaming/>)



(<https://www.heypoorplayer.com/2017/12-hydorah-review-ps4/>)



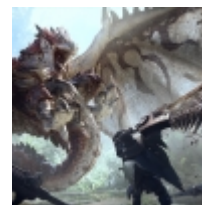
(<https://www.heypoorplayer.com/2017/12-structor-portal-review/>)



(<https://www.heypoorplayer.com/2017/07/28/second-opinion-ready-player-one-worst-thing-nerd-culture-ever-produced/ready-player-one-9/>)

Of course, the stuff that rips off *Snow Crash* – that is to say, the actual plot – is a distant second priority to what the book's *really* about: references. This is the part that everyone (<http://www.avclub.com/article/ready-player-one-backlash-has-begun-258509>) has already made fun of (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=71VFzCIEoG0>), but it's usually from the perspective that “reference humor is always terrible.” I disagree with this premise – there's actually a *great* movie that's based on references, and it's called *Scott Pilgrim VS The World*. There's two reasons the references in *Scott Pilgrim* work. The first is that they actually serve a point – *Scott Pilgrim* is a film about how relationships are often harder than we think and how, rather than being the reward at the end of a successful adventure, love is an adventure, one which takes constant work to get better in the same way you have to grind through difficult challenges in a videogame. Its references aren't just there to get you to go, “Ha! A thing I recognize!”, but to use a thing that you recognize to contextualize the point it's trying to make. A joke about an extra life isn't just a one-off joke – it's a metaphor for how we often fail in life, find ourselves at a point so low we feel like we might as well be dead, and have to pick ourselves back up and keep fighting for love, work, self-respect, or whatever's important in our lives. The 1-UP just serves as a funny way to get that fairly dark and complex idea across.

But the second reason these references work is that they're often short and sweet. In the director's own words, they were written to be so short that you could overlook them, which gives fans of “nerd culture” something to look for when they re-watch the film



(<https://www.heypoorplayer.com/2017/12/hunter-world-beta-preview-the-best-looki-hunter/>)



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and means that people who don't recognize extremely specific *Legend of Zelda* sound effects can still enjoy the movie without realizing they've missed anything.

Compare that to this shit.

([https://twitter.com/donniemnemonic/status/889215615717605376/photo/1?](https://twitter.com/donniemnemonic/status/889215615717605376/photo/1?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref_url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.avclub.com%2Farticle%2Fready-player-one-backlash-has-begun-258509)

[ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref_url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.avclub.com%2Farticle%2Fready-player-one-backlash-has-begun-258509](http://www.avclub.com%2Farticle%2Fready-player-one-backlash-has-begun-258509)) "I watched every episode of *The Greatest American Hero*, *Airwolf*, *the A-Team*, *Knight Rider*, *Misfits of Science*, and *The Muppet Show*. What about *The Simpsons*, you ask? I knew more about Springfield than I knew about my own city. *Star Trek*? Oh, I did my homework. *TOS*, *TNG*, *DS9*. Even *Voyager* and *Enterprise*. I watched them all in chronological order. The movies, too.

Phasers locked on target... I learned the name of every last goddamn Gobot and Transformer. *Land of the Lost*. *Thundarr the Barbarian*, *He-Man*, *Schoolhouse Rock!* *G.I. Joe* – I knew them all. Because knowing is half the battle!"

The section I'm quoting goes on for *ten pages*. If I pitched an article to my editor that was just me saying the names of stuff I liked for ten pages, I'd be fired. Apparently if I pitched the same thing to Random House, I'd get a huge check and a lucrative movie deal.



(<https://www.heypoorplayer.com/2017/07/28/second-opinion-ready-player-one-worst-thing-nerd-culture-ever-produced/ready-player-one-1/>)

And honestly? That's one of the *better* uses of references in the book, because at least he just says the name of the thing and moves on. If he had written the aforementioned moment in *Scott Pilgrim*, Scott would have turned to the camera after grabbing the 1-UP and explained "1-UP is a videogame term that refers to an extra 'life' gained by the player to allow continuous play before game over. The term was first used in *Super Mario Bros*, a 1985



(<https://www.heypoorplayer.com/2017/07/28/weird-nintendo-commercials/>)

TEN WEIRD NINTENDO COMMERCIALS (HTTPS://WWW.HEYPOORPLAYER.COM/2017/07/28/WEIRD-NINTENDO-COMMERCIALS/)

Seriously, what's with the 90's and gross humor? Ah, video game commercials.

Who doesn't remember Mario tripping Yoshi in the famous Smash Bros. commercial, or Crash Bandicoot trash-talking the portly plumber outside Nintendo HQ?...



(<https://www.heypoorplayer.com/2017/07/28/gain-ground-sx-retro-review-rom/>)

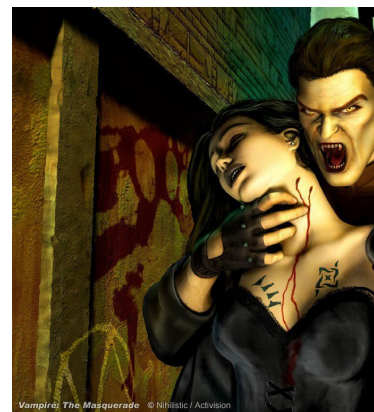
GAIN GROUND SX RETRO REVIEW (ROM) (HTTPS://WWW.HEYPOORPLAYER.COM/2017/07/28/GAIN-GROUND-SX/)

No pain, no gain! Many of you out there will more likely remember Gain Ground for the Sega Mega Drive, or perhaps the Master System, where it was released...

videogame developed and published by Nintendo.” Then he’d probably offer some unsolicited opinion, something like “*Super Mario Bros* was totally great, a masterpiece-“ hang on, that’s too complicated a word – “*Super Mario Bros* was totally great. It was great! It kicked ass!” And I know some of you think I’m going too far here, so let me hit you with another actual quote (<https://twitter.com/naricat/status/889369609849241601>): “It’s fucking lame, is what it is! The swords look like they were made out of tinfoil. And the soundtrack is epically lame. Full of synthesizers and shit. By the motherfucking Alan Parsons Project! Lame-o-rama. Beyond lame. *Highlander II* lame.”

By this point, many of you will have probably realized the truth that lies at the heart of a book that can only be described as “*Highlander III: The Sorcerer* lame.” In *Scott Pilgrim* (or *Wreck-it Ralph*, or *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, or *Alice in Wonderland*, or anything else that uses references and reference humor well) the references are used as a cultural shorthand that somehow means something in the context of the story. In *Ready Player One*, the references exist for one reason, and one reason only: to let you know how smart Ernest Cline is. Here’s a scene (<https://twitter.com/naricat/status/889369609849241601>) where the main character walks into a bar, hears a song playing, and has to recite the song’s name, recording artist, and release date so that everyone else in the bar knows he knows a lot about music. That’s the entirety of *Ready Player One*, extended over several hundred pages of torture.

In fact, let’s talk more about the main character. In *Ready Player One*, nobody on the planet matters except for Wade Watts – every character exists to serve him, whether it’s his perfect magical girlfriend, the gigantic corporation that owns a million holding companies and whose sole interest is tracking down one guy, or the character who transparently exists just to prove he’s not racist (more on that later.) And why is Wade so amazing? What makes him the savior of the universe? He has in-depth knowledge of and appreciation for the media that was popular when Ernest Cline was a kid.



(<https://www.heypoormaplayer.com/2017/07/28/second-opinion-ready-player-one-worst-thing-nerd-culture-ever-produced/>)

VAMPIRE: 20TH ANNIVERSARY E ([HTTPS://WWW.HEYPOORPLAYE THE-MASQUERADE-20TH-ANNIV](https://www.heypoormaplayer.com/2017/07/28/second-opinion-ready-player-one-worst-thing-nerd-culture-ever-produced/)

Back in the early 90's, vampires were still cool. There was none of this sparkling crap.

REVIEW ARCHIVES

- ▶ 2017 (434)
(<https://www.heypoormaplayer.com/2017/>)
- ▶ 2016 (427)
(<https://www.heypoormaplayer.com/2016/>)
- ▶ 2015 (172)
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- ▶ 2010 (12)
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(<https://www.heypoorplayer.com/2017/07/28/second-opinion-ready-player-one-worst-thing-nerd-culture-ever-produced/ready-player-one-2/>)

The novel's main deviation from the world of *Snow Crash* – besides sucking – is that not only is 80s culture still the dominant culture in 2044, it's the *only* culture. By Wade's own admission, no one has created new movies, television, or videogames in the past half-century because everyone's been too busy trying to find the clues for the Easter Egg hunt (I could bother explaining this plotline, but I won't, because it's just a contrivance to explain why anyone in 2044 would still give a shit about *Ladyhawke*.) This is a *horrifying* idea. It's okay to like or even prefer older media – lord knows I talk about *Doom* enough

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LR0MSueTHI4>) to bear out that sentiment – but the day the human race stops producing new art, new stories, new songs, and new ideas, that's the day we might as well lie down and just wait for the rising sea levels to drown us all. If the best we as a species have to offer is *Count Duckula*, then it's time to throw in the existential towel.

(Of course, *Count Duckula* isn't mentioned in *Ready Player One*, because it came out in England, and therefore wasn't a part of Ernest Cline's childhood.)

How much does the book love Wade (who's somehow bullied for liking nerd shit even though he lives in a world where the nerd shit he likes is practically holy writ, because why have a consistent setting when you could have an author-insert)? Not only does the book describe *in detail* from pages 183 to 194 the several days he spends fucking a sexbot and then raving about how important and great masturbation is. Not only does he a few pages later go on a tangent about how “geeks have a harder time getting laid than anyone” and go on a long, defensive rant about why it's not Erne-WADE'S fault he's still a virgin. *Despite* this, not only does the book's only female character (until more than 300

pages in), a startlingly gorgeous girl who he constantly calls ugly and accuses of being a man, exist as a disgustingly transparent nerd sexual fantasy (she's interested in all the same things Wade's interested in, but nowhere near as good at the challenges as he is despite having the same or often better training.)

But towards the end of the novel, Wade is directly responsible for genocide, and is presented as the victim.

What, you think I'm joking?



(<https://www.heypoorplayer.com/2017/07/28/second-opinion-ready-player-one-worst-thing-nerd-culture-ever-produced/ready-player-one-7/>)

“Genocide” may be a bit harsh, but he directly causes the deaths of the thousands of people in the Stacks, the place where he grew up, the place which includes his family and close friends. And once – *only once* – does he show any remorse, a single paragraph that’s completely forgotten. Worse, the reaction of the rest of the characters isn’t “how horrible” or “what a tragedy,” but simply telling Wade: “Thank god you weren’t there when it happened.” That’s another direct quote. In *Ready Player One*, nothing matters unless it directly affects Wade.

Later on, he’ll slip into depression – not because he committed a war crime, but because Girl Character has broken up with him for no reason BECAUSE WOMEN RIGHT. While a good writer might use this as an excuse to cause Wade to become introspective and experience a character arc that makes him less of a jerk, Ernest solves it in a single page when Wade purchases an exercise bike and works out until he’s not sad anymore. No, I’m still not kidding. I’m *never* kidding about how bad this book is.



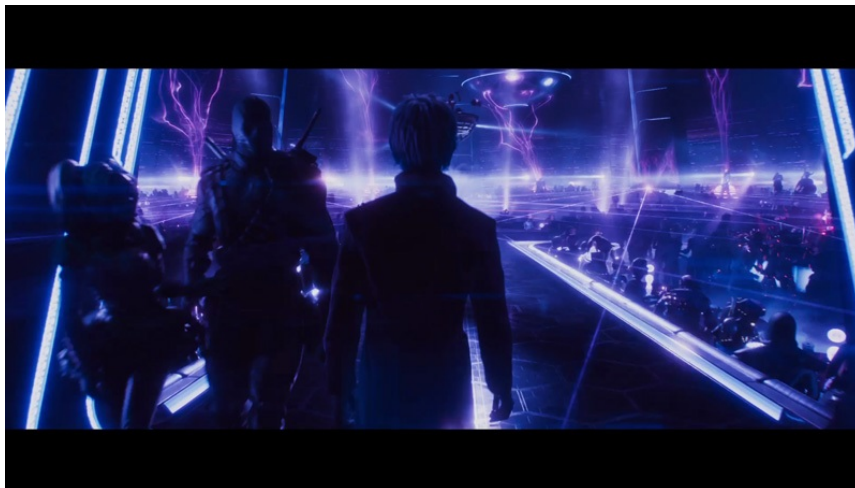
(<https://www.heypoorplayer.com/2017/07/28/second-opinion-ready-player-one-worst-thing-nerd-culture-ever-produced/ready-player-one-8/>)

I want to get back to this in a moment, but first, we need to talk about what some people in the comments are inevitably going to refer to as “SJW bullshit,” if they haven’t already done so because I mentioned that a female character was poorly-written. I guess in some ways, *Ready Player One* is actually a model of equality, because *every* character is poorly-written. Other than the girl, Art3mis, the most important secondary characters are Daito and Shoto. They’re Japanese stereotypes so embarrassingly written that in the movie I expect them to be played by two Scarlett Johannssons with scotch tape pulling her eyes back.

On page 154, during a team meeting, one of them says that “the Sixers [the villains of the book] have no honor.” In the same scene, two pages later, the OTHER character says “the Sixers have no honor,” because Ernest Cline couldn’t think of a second thing that a Japanese person would say. Writing good characters aside, I may never get over the fact that he uses the same piece of dialogue twice in a single scene. Didn’t this embarrassment to the word “literature” have an editor? Or were they not able to get all the way through this shitty thing either?

There’s plenty more examples of misogyny, racism, and even homophobia in the novel, though few quite as blatant as what we’ve already talked about. And here’s the thing: maybe you think diversity in storytelling isn’t an important issue. Maybe you think that stereotypes aren’t harmful. Or maybe you just think that these sorts of issues don’t necessarily ruin a piece of media for you – after all, *Duck Soup* is one of my favorite films, despite a particularly infamous racist joke towards the end that I will be the first to admit should never have been part of the movie.

The point is, no matter how you feel about the diversity issue, we can still all join hands and laugh at the terrible way Ernest Cline tries to address it in *Ready Player One*.



(<https://www.heypoorplayer.com/2017/07/28/second-opinion-ready-player-one-worst-thing-nerd-culture-ever-produced/ready-player-one-4/>)

So, there's only one major character who we haven't talked about yet, and that's Aech. Aech is Wade's best friend, and therefore spends most of the book dutifully divided between dotting sycophant, exposition machine, and punchline setup. Aech is a bland, poorly-written, personality-free archetype of exactly the kind you've come to expect from this book until page 318, when she and Wade meet in person. Yep, I said "she" – in the ultimate expression of "I can't be racist, I have a black friend" – it turns out that Aech, who introduced herself to Wade as a man and who had a male avatar in the Metaverse-I-mean-OASIS, is both black AND female AND gay. After taking note of her (quote) "large bosom" – which is honest-to-god his first reaction to this revelation – Wade realizes that "None of [how I felt about Aech] could be changed by anything as inconsequential as her gender, or skin color, or sexual orientation." I need you to understand this: to pre-emptively dodge criticism of his work, Cline literally introduces a black, gay, fat woman in the last pages of the book just so that his author-insert character can have a moment of introspection where he realizes how not-racist he is.

I could honestly go on for days about how badly-handled this is. Instead of actually making a character for whom being black, gay, or female are character traits, or actually looking at how being those things would affect people in a dystopian future, or diving into why such a person might want to adopt a different online persona (something which is a fascinating issue even in real life) Ernest says "none of that stuff matters! I, a white straight dude, never have to think about race or gender or sexuality, so no one

else should either!" He barely even gives Aech any time to speak, devoting 90% of that chapter to Wade's personal feelings about the matter.

Let me be clear: I'm not saying that Ernest Cline is racist, sexist, or homophobic – it's really not my place to make any judgement of that type. What I *am* saying is that he is a terrible writer who writes terribly. He cannot conceive of anything outside of his own extremely insular experiences and doesn't even put in the bare minimum of effort to give any character agency outside of his beloved protagonist. In fact, Wade immediately goes back to referring to Aech as "he" and "him" in dialogue and in narration, with no reason given other than "I just felt like calling him what I'd always called him," which would not only be a pretty icky thing to do to a real human being, but is also utterly fucking bizarre. Why even introduce those traits if you're not going to make them part of the story? You shot yourself in the foot with Chekhov's gun and then put it back on the mantelpiece! It really feels like you inserted the two-page reveal in the middle of an already finished book after someone pointed out it didn't pass the Bechdel Test (and still doesn't, by the way.)

The fact that this thing actually got published – nay, became something of a cultural phenomenon – is absolutely hysterical.



(<https://www.heypooplayer.com/2017/07/28/second-opinion-ready-player-one-worst-thing-nerd-culture-ever-produced/ready-player-one-5/>)

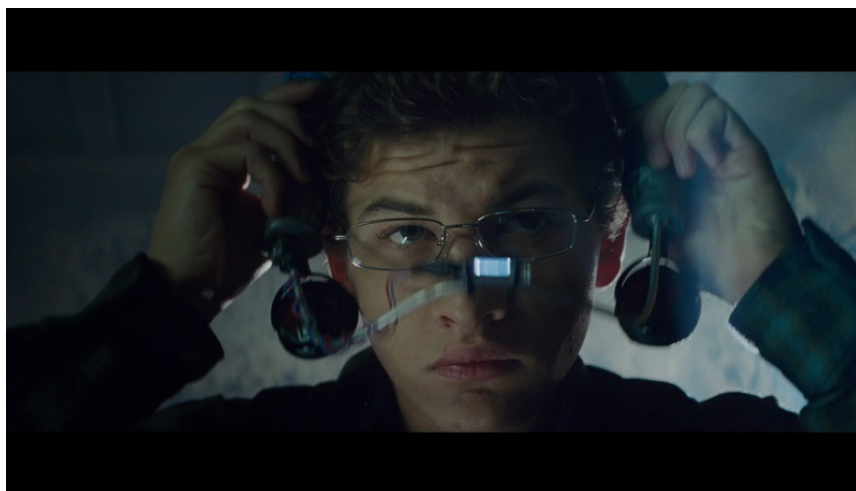
I could go on and on about the bad writing in this book – about how it doesn't follow the rule of "One Big Lie" by introducing three different unbelievable premises (the end of the world, the existence of a massive virtual reality, the nonsensical treasure hunt that can only be solved by knowing the most 80s trivia), or how Wade goes from being a fat neckbeard to a muscley Adonis after one month on an exercise bike – or hell, I could just read you some more *amazing* romantic dialogue like "The female of

the species has always found me repellent” or “It was working for me. In a big way. In a word: *hot*” or “You can’t stop me from E-mailing you.” But as awful as the bad writing, stolen plot, and paper-thin characters are, it’s time to talk about what I *really* hate about *Ready Player One*.

As I mentioned before, I’m very much a part of “nerd culture.” I’ve been a computer science major in a school full of dudes, I’ve worked for multiple gaming websites, and I make talk-into-a-camera videos on the Internet. And to me, *Ready Player One* is an important book because it is a distillation of everything that is wrong with said culture.

See, when Fandom – which used to be a singular, all-encompassing term for “stuff nerds like” – got started, it was an extremely niche thing. Often, yes, people *did* get bullied for liking videogames or comics, for memorizing *Star Wars* facts in the same way other folks memorized football statistics. And then that stopped being the case. *Star Wars: Episode VII* is one of the highest-grossing films of all time, followed by *Jurassic World* and *The Avengers*. *Game of Thrones* is the most popular show on TV, and the most popular shows on Netflix are based on the freaking Defenders. Let that sink in: we live in an age where the average person on the street has almost certainly at least heard of Jessica Jones and Luke Cage. And on my home turf, videogames, *Grand Theft Auto V* sold faster than *any piece of entertainment in history up to that point*. It wasn’t the fastest-selling game. It wasn’t even the fastest-selling game or film. It was the fastest-selling *anything*. Period.

Congratulations, folks – the geek has inherited the Earth.

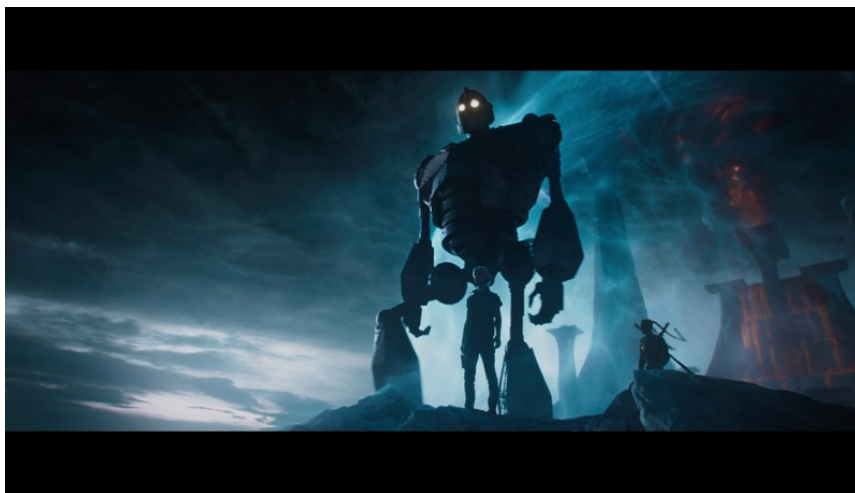


(<https://www.heypoorplayer.com/2017/07/28/second-opinion-ready-player-one-worst-thing-nerd-culture-ever-produced/ready-player-one-3/>)

But along the way, the history of bullying caused some of us to develop some pretty bad habits. Like the gatekeeping (<http://whatever.scalzi.com/2013/08/05/a-creators-note-to-gatekeepers/>) that's keeping people out of comic book shops (<https://www.themarysue.com/comics-gatekeeping-why-making-girl-comics-isnt-enough/>) even as Marvel is more popular than ever. Or the insular gaming communities – I'm talking to you, Doomworld – who attack all newcomers who don't have the "100% correct" opinions on everything (possibly because a new game just came out and introduced a load of new fans to the series.) Or, yes, in extreme cases, attacks on women and minorities who seem like they're "invading" nerds' safe spaces. I myself, as one of the few public Jews writing about games, have to delete an anti-Semitic comment from the YouTube channel at a rate of about once a week, which is absolute child's play compared to what many of my colleagues have to deal with on a daily basis thanks to a very small but very vocal contingent of geeks who are terrified of losing their toys in the wake of a very different world than the one they grew up in.

This is obvious, but I'll say it anyway: liking videogames, comics, cartoons, obscure films, or anything else that would be considered part of Fandom does not make you a bad person. It doesn't make you depraved or a mass murderer or whatever the hell Jack Thompson thought we all were in the 90s and 00s. But it also doesn't make you a *good* person. You become a good person by being a good friend, helping the less fortunate, donating to worthy causes, et cetera. Playing games may be something you do – it may even be something you do a lot, or something that you consider a major part of your life and a huge influence on how you view the world (as it certainly is in my case.) But it's not who you are.

Wade Watts, the main character of *Ready Player One*, is an asshole of the highest caliber. He's a self-obsessed manchild who is never actually forced to change for the better or even to confront the cost of his actions. His obsession with 80s culture borders on the unhealthy, and he lives in a world where that unhealthy obsession has choked out the vital human need to create. And the book considers these his *good traits*. This is his *superpower*. And that's concerning. It's concerning to me that this is somebody's perfect world.



(<https://www.heypoorplayer.com/2017/07/28/second-opinion-ready-player-one-worst-thing-nerd-culture-ever-produced/ready-player-one-6/>)

If you want a geek hero, look at Peter Parker. He likes *Star Wars* and obsesses over superheroes. He's a nerd. He gets bullied for being a nerd. But his fondness for LEGOs isn't what makes him a hero – that would be his heroism. His goodness. The fact that he'll go out of his way to help an old lady cross the street. He knows what it's like to get picked on, and instead of picking on others in turn, he chooses to stand up for the little guy no matter how hard it is. Peter Parker is what geek culture needs to strive to be every day. When we write an article or a videogame or a book, we should think "Would Peter Parker write this? Would he agree with what we're saying?"

And conversely, I propose we should also ask "would Wade Watts like this?" And if the answer is yes, you should delete your draft, burn your script, drown the thing in white-out and start over. And it's this test, more than anything else, that *Ready Player One* so catastrophically fails. Yes, it's boring, poorly-written, and literally contains a ten-page list of titles of things the author likes. But it also fails the basic test of humanity, creating a character and a world so repugnant that I feel more than justified in saying it represents the absolute worst of nerd culture.

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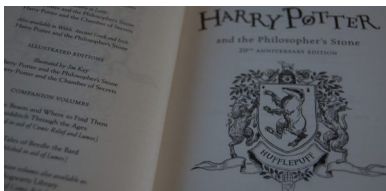


I. Coleman

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I Coleman believes that videogames are the most important, most fascinating, and most potentially world-changing entertainment medium today. When not saying dorky, embarrassing crap like that, I is a game designer, science fiction author, and former reviews editor for the now-defunct GamerSyndrome.com (<http://GamerSyndrome.com>) with years of experience writing for and about games.

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