

Review: Ready Player One

Spielberg's virtual reality blockbuster is a knowing pop culture treat, writes [Oscar Bentley](#)

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Image: Warner Bros./Village Roadshow Pictures

9/10

Director: Steven Spielberg

Starring: Tye Sheridan, Olivia Cooke, Ben Mendelsohn

Length: 2hr 20m

Rating: 12A

Ready Player One is a nerd's delight. A large-scale blockbuster jammed with pop culture references, who better to direct it than one Steven Spielberg, arguably (though not really, c'mon guys) the greatest filmmaker still alive and working today?

Set in 2045, *Ready Player One* lands us in a world where everybody spends their time in the virtual reality OASIS, escaping the crumbling state of the real world. Protagonist Wade Watts (Tye Sheridan) who lives in the slum like trailer "stacks" of Ohio is a Gunter (egg hunter). When OASIS creator James Halliday (Mark Rylance) died five years prior, he left a quest – the first to successfully complete three tasks, unlocking three keys which in turn unlock the mystical Easter egg, gains ownership of the entire OASIS, which has become the most powerful economic force on the planet.



Image: Warner Bros./Village Roadshow Pictures

Nefarious organisation IOI are also searching for the keys, plotting to gain control of the OASIS to wring it for every last bit of profit. So when Wade finally manages to successfully complete the first task and gain the first key, he must clan (team) up with fellow Gunters such as Art3mis (Olivia Cooke) and Aech (Lena Waithe) to prevent the OASIS from falling into IOI's hands.

Based on Ernest Cline's bestselling novel, the virtual reality world of *Ready Player One* allows Spielberg to indulge himself with Easter eggs and references (Den of Geek counting 205 to be exact), which range from Batman to Kong to *The Iron Giant*. The flick heavily relies upon the pop culture of the 80s and 90s, which Spielberg is self aware enough to realise he had a heavy hand in creating, so tends to eschew references to his own work, which apparently littered the book, although a few such as the DeLorean from the Spielberg-produced *Back to the Future* slip through. The second quest, which revolves around a scene from *The Shining*, allows Spielberg to continue his Kubrick admiration, 17 years on from the release of *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*.

The movie spends more time in the animated OASIS than it does in the live action world, explaining the lengthy post-production process. The film was shot in the summer of 2016, with Spielberg shooting and releasing *The Post* between the start and completion of post on *Ready Player One* (although he is known for back to back shoots, take 1993's *Jurassic Park* and *Schindler's List* for example). The lengthy post pays off through - the OASIS feels lived in, with the mocap-ed characters of the OASIS believable and, at times, more compelling than their live action counterparts.

Alan Silvestri's score does a good job of emulating the John Williams anthems of Spielberg classics (*Ready Player One* is only the third film in Spielberg's entire filmography not scored by Williams), and is accompanied by a soundtrack of pop culture classics, a particular standout being the opening scene, set to Van Halen's 'Jump'. The climactic battle also uses Starship's 'We Built This City', although the scene would have benefitted from whacking the volume to 11 and letting the song take control, rather than the tinny in-universe source that had it quietly playing.



Image: Warner Bros./Village Roadshow Pictures

The ensemble are all pretty standard, with Spielberg marking his third collaboration with Rylance in pretty quick succession. Olivia Cooke is really the standout of the young cast here (side note: if you haven't already, be sure to check her out in the spellbinding *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl*), while Ben Mendhelson does well in his villainous turn as the IOI CEO, although it's not too dissimilar from his recent *Rogue One* antagonist. For true nostalgia however, the young players could have done with deaging to pre-teens or younger.

Despite its fairly predictable yet still poignant message (spoiler alert: don't forget reality from within the

virtual), it doesn't number among Spielberg's most "important" works (that's largely reserved for a few classic pictures such as *E.T.*, *Jaws*, and his dramas). Some critics have hailed it as a return to form after a decade of misfires (although I think that's a little unfair, admittedly I haven't seen *The Post*, and, despite being someone who liked *The BFG*, it is a little slow, but *Lincoln* is simply near on three hours of excellence), while others have hit out at the lack of character development and subtlety.

The thing about *Ready Player One* though is that it's a movie - Spielberg made clear to point this out at its SXSW premiere. It's not going to contain the heights of a film such as *Schindler's List*, and that's perfectly fine. Spielberg films may be important, but his movies are where the magic happens. And if you're coming for a bit of Spielberg magic, you won't be disappointed.



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