

A P A R E N T ' S
T O
G U I D E

Ready Player One

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Being human totally sucks most of the time. Videogames are the only thing that make life bearable.

—Wade Watts

Are You Ready for *Ready Player One*?

Imagine a future not too far removed from our own in which a brilliant computer designer has developed a virtual universe. Within that universe, the only limits are the boundaries of human creativity.

People can live almost every part of their lives in the digital utopia known as the OASIS (Ontologically Anthropocentric Sensory Immersive Simulation), experiencing anything they desire and being whoever they want to be. Since the real world has gone through an energy crisis, an economic collapse, and multiple wars, most people would rather live in a fantasy world anyway.

This is the setting of Ernest Cline's bestselling 2011 novel, *Ready Player One*. It's an engaging story that has highly relevant themes, considering the [strides being made with VR technology](#) in our own time. And that's not to mention our increasing tendency to use media (especially social media) and technology to escape our problems and to define our identities, trends the book explores in depth.

Ready Player One has been popular, but a [movie based on the novel](#) and directed by Steven Spielberg is set to be released in March 2018. With the movie coming out, the story will only become more culturally relevant. If you have teens who love to read and who enjoy sci-fi, fantasy, and/or videogames, they will almost certainly enjoy this novel if they haven't read it already.

We encourage you to read the book along with them and to use this guide to help your children think through the ideas in it. While this guide is just about the book, our hope is that it will also help you have good conversations about the movie when it comes out.

— A few cautions

Because the story is engaging and many of its themes are relevant, we think *RPO* is worth recommending to you. Having said that, we do have a few warnings.

One is that there is strong language at certain points of the novel, of the kind that would earn a movie an R rating. The second is that the book addresses the subjects of virtual sex and masturbation. We should also note that the main character rejects any belief in God or religion outright and that, toward the end, homosexuality is portrayed positively.

Despite this content, we recommend Cline's novel first because we think this content represents experiences that are common to most people, even Christians. Second, the more elicited content is not gratuitous and therefore provides opportunities for formative conversations to take place.

In her essay, "The Church and the Fiction Writer," [Flannery O'Connor describes](#) the tension Christian writers feel as they strive to hold on to truth while presenting an honest depiction of life's gray areas. She says that the writer who wants to reveal God's mysteries needs to do so by faithfully describing "what he sees from where he is. An affirmative vision cannot be demanded of him without limiting his freedom to observe what man has done with the things of God."

In other words, we can't help people grasp the extent of God's redemption without first acknowledging how far we've fallen. If we pass over the more uncomfortable aspects of

human life, our art will be dishonest. The Bible itself does not shy away from the depravity in human nature when it recounts people committing incest, rape, and murder. God's word honestly describes the current context of a broken world while pointing us toward hope and redemption.

Though Cline is not a Christian, his novel portrays experiences and struggles that all people face, things like doubting God or dealing with loneliness. If a child is old enough and mature enough to handle this content, *RPO* can give us a unique opportunity to discuss issues with them that would likely not come up otherwise—or, at the very least, be extremely awkward to bring up out of the blue. Instead of being afraid of or avoiding these topics, we can help disciple our teenagers toward a redemptive, life-giving viewpoint on them.

What follows is a summary of the story's setup and its major themes, as well as questions to discuss with teens. Be forewarned that there are spoilers.

— **What is *Ready Player One* about?**

The novel follows Wade Watts, a teenage orphan who lives in poverty in the “stacks” (i.e. stacks of mobile homes and abandoned vehicles), through his adventures in the OASIS, “a massively multiplayer online game” that has grown into a “globally networked virtual reality.” This OASIS is so compelling and reality is so depressing that most people in this futuristic society spend their lives inside it. They build friendships, fall in love, and get married in the OASIS without ever meeting these people in real life.

Wade is no different, but his obsession is about more than just creating a new identity: He's part of a massive quest. Upon his death, the OASIS's creator, James Halliday, announced via his avatar (virtual identity) that he had hidden the ultimate [easter egg](#) within the simulation. Whoever solves the “*Hunt*” and discovers the egg will inherit Halliday's fortune and control the entire OASIS. To find the egg, users must find three keys—copper, jade, and crystal—that will open three different gates, each with its own test.

This *Hunt* spawns a subculture of egg hunters (or “*gunters*,” as they come to be known), of which Wade is one. Born into a world where society is collapsing around him and in which his personal life is full of pain, Wade says the OASIS is “like having an escape hatch into a better reality.” But when Halliday's *Hunt* begins, the OASIS becomes more than a way of coping. It gives Wade a “dream worth chasing.”

Halliday was an antisocial genius obsessed with 1980s pop culture. So his clues and challenges are all based on his favorite videogames, comic books, music, movies, etc. (This is part of the massive appeal of the story and why it appeals to “nerds,” especially those who grew up in the '80s.) In order to find the egg, *gunters* dedicate their lives to learning everything they can about Halliday's life and passions. They primarily rely on *Anorak's Almanac* (“*Anorak*” being the name of Halliday's avatar), a collection of Halliday's journals and observations on his favorite media, which Wade refers to as his “bible.”

The *gunters* obviously care about finding Halliday's fortune, but they also care about his legacy. They were born into a dying world, and he eased their suffering by providing free access to an alternate reality (although it is difficult to do much in the OASIS without spending money).

Set against Wade and the *gunters* is Innovative Online Industries (aka the IOI), the largest internet service provider in the world and a monolithic corporation. It devotes its almost unlimited resources and employees (known as “*Sixers*” because of the numbers that identify

them in the OASIS) to winning the Hunt so it can take control of the OASIS and begin charging people to use it. Wade and the other gunters believe that, should the IOI succeed in finding the egg, the corporation would destroy free speech and user anonymity. The company would turn the OASIS into a “corporate-run dystopia, an overpriced theme park for wealthy elitists,” everything Halliday was against.

The action of *Ready Player One* centers on Wade and his friends trying to solve Halliday’s puzzle before the IOI does. At the beginning of the story, Wade (known in the OASIS as Parzival) becomes the first gunter to locate and gain a copy of the Copper Key.

Not long after, Wade’s best friend Aech (pronounced like the letter H), his crush Art3mis (pronounced “Artemis”), and two other gunters named Daito and Shoto join him as part of the High Five, the first five people to find the Copper Key and pass the First Gate. But the Sixers are hot on their trail, soon blocking the way to the key so that other gunters can’t get to it and farming as many copies of the key for themselves as they can.

Initially, the Hunt is a way for Wade to get out of poverty and to have a purpose for his life. But after success makes him famous, it becomes clear that the IOI is amoral and ruthless. Wade soon finds himself battling not just for his livelihood but also for his life and the lives of his friends.

— How does the novel deal with escapism?

By far the major theme of *Ready Player One* is escaping the suffering of the real world. For Wade’s generation, the OASIS is “much more than a game or an entertainment platform...We’d been born into an ugly world, and the OASIS was our one happy refuge.”

Apart from the sheer creativity of it, the OASIS does have legitimate benefits, such as those it offers for education, which is free to anyone and offers new opportunities for exploration and learning. Wade and his virtual classmates can experience different periods of history, visit the (virtual) Louvre during art class, or virtually explore the human heart in biology. The OASIS also sets limits on the behavior of students’ avatars, giving teachers an easier time managing their classrooms.

But overall, the impact of the OASIS on humanity is negative. Instead of bringing people into greater flourishing, it leads them to ignore the real world completely. Halliday’s best friend and former business partner, Ogden Morrow, at one point describes the OASIS as “a self-imposed prison for humanity.”

As far as the real world goes, Wade lives a life of almost total isolation. He is socially awkward, insecure, and uncomfortable in his body. It’s media of all kinds that make his life bearable: Videogames comfort him when he is upset or depressed; he watches *Family Ties* so he can experience a happy family life. Though he is extremely awkward when interacting with strangers in real life, he doesn’t have any problem making friends online. The OASIS serves the same purpose for Wade’s best friend, Aech, whom we later discover was rejected by his family. Art3mis, the girl Wade likes, admits that she also lives inside “this illusion,” rather than in the real world.

It’s not difficult to see why virtual reality would appeal to any person, but even more so to people who dislike how they look, are social outcasts, or are unhappy with their real lives. In the OASIS, Wade has a level of control that is not otherwise possible: “the fat could become thin, the ugly could become beautiful, and the shy, extroverted.” Users can even create avatars that look like animals, aliens, or creatures from mythology.

While the OASIS has made his difficult life bearable, as he continues the Hunt, Wade comes to recognize that he is indeed living in a self-imposed prison. In the OASIS, he is a celebrity because he was the first gunter to find the Copper Key and make it through the First Gate. He earns money through endorsing products and has his own fan club. But the reality is that he is “nothing but an antisocial hermit. A recluse. A pale-skinned, pop-culture-obsessed geek... another sad, lost, lonely soul wasting his life on a glorified videogame.”

Discussion Questions

- You probably don't need this [data from the Pew Research Center](#) to tell you that people are increasingly dependent on their devices. How are you or those you know “living in the OASIS” today?
- Apart from using technology, what are some other ways people try to escape their real lives?
- Why do you think people try to escape their lives? Is it always because their lives are painful?
- If the OASIS existed now, how do you think our society would relate to it? How do you think we should relate to it if it were real?

What does it say about anonymity?

A line from the latest trailer for the film is, “People come to the OASIS for all the things they can *do*, but they stay because of all the things they can *be*.” Anonymity (i.e. who they are in the real world staying unknown in the OASIS) is something the gunters perceive as a basic right, one which they fear the IOI will destroy. Of course, one result of being able to create your own identity is that no one really knows when you're lying or telling the truth about yourself.

Anonymity has both advantages and dangers. No one knows who Parzival really is until the IOI bribes Wade's school and gets his information. Because the IOI turns out to be willing to murder to achieve its goals, anonymity saves the lives of the other prominent gunters. Wade only survives when the IOI tries to kill him because he happens to be in a hideout no one knows about.

But anonymity also makes it easy to deceive other OASIS users about one's true self. Knowing the dangers involved with anonymity doesn't stop Wade from falling for Art3mis, someone he has never met in real life. She's a fellow gunter who is interesting and clever and whose avatar is attractive. Wade knows that in real life she could be totally different from how she appears online. She could be an older, overweight man or he could find her physically repulsive. But knowing this truth does not stop him from reacting as though what he sees online is real.

Discussion Questions

- What are benefits and dangers of online anonymity nowadays? Is building up an online identity the same thing as being anonymous? Why or why not?
- What are some ways people hide who they are, whether through technology or by other means?
- How do we let appearances (or even a lack of knowledge about other people) mislead us in real life?
- How can we rely less on our assumptions about others?

How can the story help me talk about control with my teens?

In addition to creating their identities, OASIS users can control certain situations instead of dealing with consequences. Toward the beginning of the story, Wade goes to his virtual school and a fellow classmate insults him. After Wade gives a cutting response, he mutes the other boy's comeback and moves on, avoiding any more consequences of the situation (something we all wish we could've done a time or two, amiright?!)

OASIS users never have to show how they really feel if they don't want to because they can turn off their accounts' "real-time emotion feature." When Wade meets with Sixers leader Nolan Sorrento, he observes that Sorrento is likely running diplomacy software to control his facial expressions. At another point in the story, Wade and Art3mis meet at Ogden Morrow's birthday party in a virtual dance club. Wade doesn't have to rely on his actual dancing abilities to impress her. Instead, he uploads dance software that takes charge of his avatar, causing Art3mis's eyes to light up "in surprise and delight."

Discussion Questions

- Have you ever wanted to "mute" someone or learn something really quickly in order to impress others? Why? Why do you think God didn't create our world to work like that?
- How do people use technology to try to control their lives or their "image"?
- Have you ever tried to control a situation or the behavior of another person? What motivated you and what were some of the consequences of doing so?
- What's the difference between being controlling and being responsible?
- How can we move toward godly responsibility while still living lives that are surrendered to God?

What does it say about one's purpose?

The theme of escapism is directly tied to the idea of purpose, another main topic of the book. Because the characters are suffering and don't have anything good and meaningful to live for, they escape to a virtual reality. Initially, Wade's purpose within that reality is finding Halliday's egg. But he lets himself be distracted from this purpose as he gets to know Art3mis and starts falling for her. His obsession with her replaces his obsession with the Hunt, and they both start spending more time with each other than they do on figuring out the next clue. When Wade tells Art3mis he loves her, she realizes they've gone too far and cuts off communication with him, leaving him more lonely and isolated than ever.

In the face of losing Art3mis *and* the contest, Wade decides that he is going to commit suicide because he feels he has nothing left to live for. He is only saved from this decision when fellow High Fiver Shoto contacts Wade to tell him that the IOI has killed Daito. (Notably, Shoto's purpose then becomes revenge.)

As the IOI starts dominating the Hunt and taking down anyone in its way, Wade's goals take on a broader scope and become more selfless. Instead of just trying to make his own life better, he fights to take down the evil corporation, rescue the OASIS, and save other people's lives.

As far as spirituality goes, Wade dismisses religion as a "pleasant fantasy." His favorite neighbor in the stacks, Mrs. Gilmore, is kind and very religious. She prays for him and wants him to be saved. Wade sees her beliefs as something that help her to have hope and continue living her life, even though they are a "total crock." Instead, Halliday's Hunt is Wade's

religion, something that Wade consciously acknowledges. His view is that religion gives Mrs. Gilmore purpose, and the Hunt gives him purpose. He really does treat *Anorak's Almanac* as his bible, letting Halliday's views guide his own life.

So while the novel's overall message about escapism is positive, but its message about purpose falls short. When Wade solves the quest and meets Halliday's avatar, Halliday warns him against using the OASIS as a way of avoiding reality. Halliday admits that he created the OASIS because he couldn't bear the real world. But at the end of his life, he realized that "as terrifying and painful as reality can be, it's also the only place where you can find true happiness. Because reality is *real*."

The problem is that when the Hunt is over and Wade realizes that living in the real world is better, his primary motive for staying there is his affection for Art3mis—or Samantha, which is her real name. It is implied that they will use their money to make the world a better place, which has been Art3mis's goal all along.

There's nothing wrong with Art3mis influencing Wade for the better, but there is a problem with him making a girl his reason for living. The idea of living for another person is especially deceptive because our culture so often portrays romance as the best kind of love and the ultimate point of life. And while benefiting the human race is a noble goal—something each of us should try to do—it's still merely putting a band-aid over a gaping wound without having/offering the ultimate solution to suffering and death found only in Christ.

Discussion Questions

- What are activities you do that feel like they have meaning and purpose, but don't ultimately?
- How does RPO shed light on real purposes God has us for (i.e., living for something beyond ourselves, sacrificing for others, romantic love, community)?
- How does RPO fall short of showing what true flourishing looks like?
- Have you or someone you know ever struggled with rejecting God because of the suffering in the world?
- How can people wrestle with the problem of pain well, instead of pretending it doesn't exist or rejecting God because of how they feel? What is the purpose of your pain?
- Do you think that people ever use religion as an easy escape from the hard questions of life? If so, how? What would it look like to see faith as the reason to engage the real world as opposed to escape it?
- How does being a Christ-follower give us purpose that can't be found anywhere else?

———— How does it portray romance and sexuality?

There are several aspects of Wade's attraction to Art3mis/Samantha that are positive. He is drawn to her because of who she is: They share the same goals, and he finds her interesting and clever.

In addition, though Wade's intentions for Halliday's fortune are self-centered, Art3mis is focused on helping others. If he wins the Hunt, Wade wants to continue in his escapism by building a spaceship and leaving Earth with a few of his closest friends, whereas Art3mis wants to feed the starving people in the world, heal the environment, and solve the energy crisis. Luckily, Art3mis is able to influence Wade to care about the bigger picture because of his interest in her.

However, Wade is also interested in Art3mis because he finds her avatar attractive, even

though he knows it's an illusion. He foolishly allows himself to become infatuated with someone he's never met. She seems trustworthy, but for most of the story he has no actual proof that she isn't lying to him. At one point, Wade argues with Art3mis that in the OASIS they exist as nothing but "raw personality" (and by implication their truest selves). She counters that "The OASIS lets you be whoever you want to be. That's why everyone is addicted to it."

Wade also lets his infatuation with Art3mis consume his entire life. He neglects the Hunt, and he neglects his friendship with Aech. He doesn't protect himself in a healthy way emotionally, but gives himself entirely to his desire to be with her. The result is that when she decides not to talk to him anymore, he spirals into despair and becomes suicidal. He makes a person his purpose, and without that purpose, he's left with nothing to live for.

As we warned earlier, one way Wade copes with loneliness in the aftermath of Art3mis's rejection is through masturbation. He buys a doll to help make sex simulations more realistic, but soon realizes that what he is doing is just glorified masturbation. A positive aspect of this part of the story is that virtual sex is depicted as degrading and dissatisfying.

But *RPO* does portray masturbation as a viable outlet for dealing with loneliness and sexual frustration. Wade adopts Halliday's viewpoint, as described in the almanac, without hesitation: Halliday views the release provided through masturbation as crucial to functioning in life.

Discussion Questions

- How can romantic love legitimately help two people to be better people than they would have been apart from each other?
- How can romantic love be twisted into codependency?
- What are examples from the story of how Wade and Art3mis either were vulnerable with each other online or hid from each other online?
- How do people "hide" from each other in relationships, whether through technology or in other ways?
- Is it easy or hard to remind yourself that what you see online isn't the full picture, regarding people you're romantically attracted to and people you simply admire?
- What challenges do you think Wade and Art3mis will face as they try to have a relationship in the real world?
- Are there ways in which technology can benefit relationships?
- (For teens who are ready) Do you think that masturbating is a legitimate outlet for sexual frustration and loneliness? Why or not? What does Scripture say about God's plan for fulfillment and sexuality? Does masturbation fit into that beautiful plan or potentially detract from it? Why?

— How can I use the story to point my kids toward better community and friendship?

The main characters of *RPO* are outcasts for one reason or another. They don't have healthy (or any) relationships in the real world, but experience all of their meaningful interactions within the OASIS. [Stanford psychiatrist Dr. Elias Aboujaoude believes](#) that, in the future, VR might lead us to stop desiring social interactions in real life because we'll be so accustomed to satisfying all our social needs online. This adjustment will, he says, be similar to "the one experienced by digital natives, whose perception of a healthy social life has been shaped by platforms like Facebook and [Gchat](#)."

But rather than portraying online relationships as simply an evolution in the way we interact

with and relate to others, *RPO* has a positive message about the importance of living in the real world. The story also highlights the fact that we need others and should not totally rely on ourselves. At one point, Wade observes in an offhand way that playing as a team makes it easier to complete most of the quests in the OASIS, even apart from the Hunt for Halliday's egg.

In the end, working as a team is the only way to finish the Hunt and find the egg. It's only because Wade has the support of Art3mis, Aech, Shoto, and Og (Halliday's former partner) that he is able to solve the quest. Their shared goals also lead to something they all desperately need: community with people in the real world.

Part of living in community, according to the story, is accepting people for who they are. Wade ends up discovering that his friend Aech, whom he thought was male, is actually a girl named Helen Harris who was kicked out of her home when her mom found out she was a lesbian.

While it might be tempting to be frustrated with the book's endorsement of homosexuality, this is an opportunity for us to help our kids think through how to love people well while not compromising our beliefs. We all want to be loved and accepted for who we are, no matter our flaws. God Himself loves us without condemnation—but He never leaves us the way we are. He's in the business of sanctifying us and making us holy *because* He loves us. We should strive to follow His example in our own relationships.

Discussion Questions

- Do you think friendships that happen exclusively online can be real friendships? What are the benefits and disadvantages of connecting with people online?
- Think about how you use technology and social media. Do these habits lead you toward fulfilling community or away from it?
- Wade and the other gunters become friends because of their shared interests and goals. How important is it for people to have similar passions and purposes in order to be good friends?
- How you can love your friends who have different beliefs without compromising your convictions?

Final thoughts

Ready Player One is an engrossing and creative adventure. It stands on its own as a compelling story, but also raises important questions about technology, what it means to live a good life, friendship, and more.

There is a lot more to discuss besides what we've mentioned here (such as whether Wade was justified in breaking into the IOI or in risking the lives of his family). As you read through it together, allow your teens to ask questions, ponder possibilities, wrestle through quandaries, and ultimately find Truth. If we approach it well, *Ready Player One* can serve as the catalyst for conversations about deep, life-changing questions and concepts.

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