

The Illusory Golden Egg: A Study of Dual Narrative Progressions in Ready Player One

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Abstract: Directed by Steven Spielberg, a well-known Hollywood director, *Ready Player One* constructs a "metaverse" utopian world full of freedom and equality through a large number of intertexts of popular culture and colorful virtual reality imaginations, and has received high praise from a large number of movie fans. However, if we closely examine the narrative process of "Ready Player One", we can find another potential narrative drive hidden behind the explicit story of the film. This undercurrent of narrative runs through the entire film. It promotes the narrative process together with the explicit plot and shapes richer and more three-dimensional characters, and forms a profound opposition to the values of freedom and equality conveyed by the film, thus forming an internal contradictory tension in the theme of the film and endowing it with more complex and profound meanings and inspirations.

Keywords: *Ready Player One*; Latent Narrative; Metaverse; Intertextuality

1. Introduction

In 2018, Steven Spielberg's *Ready Player One* was released, constructing a metaverse world by incorporating a vast array of pop culture texts. From a traditional narrative perspective, the film does not seem to have made any intentional breakthroughs, but rather follows the classic Hollywood "hero's journey" model [1]. The golden egg that the protagonist ultimately obtains symbolizes themes such as freedom, equality, and a focus on real-world issues.

However, Shen Dan's concept of "dual narrative progression" provides an alternative perspective for analyzing such works: "In many fictional narratives, there often exists an independent, latent narrative progression behind the plot development.

This progression not only runs parallel to the overt plot but also complements and opposes it, thus shaping richer themes and character images"[2]. Yang Lei, in his research titled "Contradictions Behind Contradictions: The Latent Narrative Progression in Ready Player One," has examined the internal conflicts within the characters of the film [3], but the deeper thematic contradictions of the film still require further exploration.

2. The Explicit Narrative of Freedom and Equality

In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "freedom" is defined as the power and right to act, speak, or think as one wants without hindrance or restraint. It is a state of being able to exercise rights without being subject to limitations or constraints, implying that individuals have free will and self-determination in their actions [4]. "Equality" is commonly understood to mean the state of being equal, especially in status, rights, and opportunities [5]. Like most Hollywood blockbusters, *Ready Player One* explicitly champions these two values through its heroic narrative.

2.1 The Landscape of Freedom in the Virtual World

The film opens with the protagonist, Wade, providing a voiceover that paints a bleak picture of the future real world. This is contrasted with the vibrant and prosperous virtual world, OASIS, which Wade enters through a VR headset. In this virtual realm, players seem to have truly achieved self-governance and act according to their free will.

Moreover, players can acquire and consume any identity from popular culture. This freedom of action and identity not only attracts global players to OASIS in the film but also deeply resonates with the audience.

The film further reinforces the theme of freedom through its portrayal of OASIS's creator, the designer Halliday. The reclusive and introverted Halliday in the real world was motivated to create OASIS.

Whether it's the first conversation between the male and female protagonists or Wade's search for clues in Halliday's archives, the repeated emphasis on "Halliday hated rules" underscores the film's exaltation of the spirit of freedom. These details suggest that, like his previous Indiana Jones series, Spielberg advocates for "freedom" as a core theme in *Ready Player One*.

2.2 OASIS Commitment to Equality

From the beginning of the film, the narrative gradually highlights the theme of "equality." According to Wade, "artifacts" are randomly dropped in the OASIS game, and "anyone has a chance to get them as long as their skills are good enough." Despite his poverty, Wade can still carve out a place for himself in the game thanks to his gaming skills.

Meanwhile, the film further reinforces this theme through flashbacks of the villain, Nolan Sorrento. Sorrento once suggested to Halliday that the game should be tiered according to players' spending, but Halliday firmly rejected this proposal, demonstrating his insistence on a fair in-game mechanism. In the film's explicit narrative, this setting clearly conveys the principle of equality in the virtual world—in OASIS, purchasing advantages with money cannot guarantee victory, which contrasts with the capital-dominated hierarchical system commonly seen in the Western world.

Of course, the climax of the film further highlights *Ready Player One's* view of equality. As the central figure of the "hero's journey," Wade participates in the OASIS battle. The villain monopolizes the competition for the third-level "Easter egg," while Wade mobilizes global players through live streaming, calling for a collective resistance. His rallying cry, "In the name of James Halliday," not only serves as a symbolic representation of the ideals of "freedom and equality" but also creates a clear binary opposition with the villainous group, reflecting the film's determination to defend freedom and

equality.

3. The Implicit Process of Discipline and Punishment

If we expand our vision to the implicit narrative process behind the explicit plot development, we can discover that the film subtly reveals Halliday's authoritarianism and discipline. The immense influence of capital is also ever-present, and players' autonomy and the fairness of the game are in jeopardy. Everything follows another semantic trajectory, deeply rebelling against the two themes of freedom and equality.

3.1 The Rebuffal of Freedom

In the first level of the "Easter egg" hunt, a giant gorilla always guards the finish line of the racing competition, preventing anyone from passing. It's worth noting the way Wade wins: he repeatedly visits the archives containing Halliday's memories and reads an implication from a statement where Halliday rejected a proposal to set rules: "Why can't we go backward?"

The secret lies not in moving forward but in retreating from the starting line. This implies that from the moment Wade follows this operation, the theme of freedom has been undermined: players do not have control over the game, but it is entirely in the hands of Halliday, the dreamer who claims to "hate setting rules" and the creator of the world. The irony is that one of the most important rules of the "Easter egg" game is hidden precisely in Halliday's statement of refusing to set rules.

The film's homage to Kubrick's *The Shining* is also a much-discussed scene. This arrangement not only diversifies the film's style but also secretly continues the film's first act's rebuttal of the theme of freedom in the implicit process. The protagonists originally thought the second key was hidden in the world of *The Shining*, but instead, they were met with a zombie's dagger and Jack's axe.

After being frustrated, they returned to Halliday's thinking, made up for Halliday's regret, and cracked Halliday's code. If the "Halliday" in the explicit plot is a symbol of freedom and equality, then in the implicit process, it is the opposite: the first level reveals the necessity of "following

Halliday," while the second level shows that only by being more "Halliday" on the basis of Halliday can one solve the game's mystery. Halliday's "ghost" always looms over OASIS, and the dagger and axe in the *The Shining* segment, like the gorilla in the first level, serve as punishment for those who do not follow the rules.

In the "OASIS battle," the implicit process further continues to rebuff the theme of freedom. Wade does not interrupt the company members' attempt on the third level. At that moment, he cares more about the sentiment of the game itself than the ownership of the Easter egg. As the implicit process rebuffs the theme of freedom, the explicit plot's positive reinforcement of this theme also gradually strengthens, thereby concealing the ever-increasing contradiction between the two.

However, this treatment creates another contradiction: when the player successfully completes the level but still fails, Wade confidently reveals that he has already known the correct way to pass the level. It seems pointless to ask whether Wade would have stopped attacking if he had found that the player's method was correct. In Hollywood's narrative strategy, the protagonist must be the winner. However, there is a flaw in the narrative line here, and the film therefore casts doubt on Wade's character.

As Hillis Miller said, "Narrative lines are never safe passages from one place to another; as soon as someone steps on them, they may break under the weight" [6]. The countless cracked ice surfaces in the film are a metaphor for this narrative line, suggesting the cracks in the narrative and the deep divergence of the implicit process from the explicit theme.

3.2 The Irony of Equality

The underlying narrative of this aspect was already set in motion at the beginning of the film: when the protagonist leaves his home, a billboard advertises VR peripherals, revealing that there are differences in the quality of gaming equipment. This is further confirmed when the protagonist's aunt's boyfriend steals the money she saved for a new house to buy an "artifact" but fails due to the inferior peripherals.

At the same time, this implies the acquisition mechanism of "artifacts" in OASIS: they can also be obtained by making in-game purchases. In this way, the fairness that OASIS claims becomes a mere facade. Moreover, the cost of the game is extremely high, and it is mentioned in passing by the protagonist's group that his father died working in a "contract labor center" due to a huge debt.

More ironically, although the protagonist excels in both skill and sentiment, he immediately spends a large sum of money to order a high-quality peripheral for himself after receiving a reward. The most symbolic image in the film is perhaps that Wade's aunt's savings are enough to buy a new house, but in the gaming world, they can only exchange for an "artifact." The house, as a typical necessity of life, implicitly satirizes the world presented in the film and is consistent throughout the subsequent narrative process.

After the protagonist refuses Nolan's "offer", Nolan immediately sends people to destroy the protagonist's stack of apartments, and Wade's aunt and her boyfriend are killed. However, this horrific plot does not seem to be the focus of the film. Part of the reason is that the film focuses on portraying Wade's loneliness and dependence on others in the real world, and his aunt's boyfriend even physically abuses him. Through such a plot, the power imbalance in reality is concealed: Wade, a young man from the bottom of society, has almost no ability to resist the powerful capital.

The root cause of the death of Wade's "family" is that his aunt's boyfriend stole the money for buying a house to recharge the game, causing them to be unable to escape the predicament and move out of their residence. Therefore, the essence of OASIS remains "devouring": it coerces the lower class into high-risk gambling, and the cost of losing the gamble is destruction. In this way, the tragedy of the lower class in the game further ironically reflects the theme of equality claimed by the film in the implicit narrative.

At the end of the film, Wade inherits OASIS and becomes the new "Halliday." In the shot of the male and female protagonists kissing, the background is a new mansion,

and the implicit symbol of the "house" continues to the end of the story. The protagonist enters the upper class, but through the window of the mansion, one can still see the dilapidated stack of apartments where people's lives have not changed. Even if the battle in OASIS is as sensational as it is, it cannot stir up any ripples in the real world.

Despite this, the narrator's voiceover announces the new rules he has set: the game will be closed for two days a week, "and everyone needs to spend more time in the real world." This sentence more sharply satirizes the theme of equality. As Schlegel defined irony, it is a kind of "eternal suspension" [7]. The implicit process of the film highlights injustice and privilege, and this conflicts with a single logos, and can only be suspended in the end. The film does not explain the mansion and the dilapidated window outside, and as the camera gradually focuses on the male and female protagonists, they also disappear from the screen. This treatment is consistent with the aforementioned embarrassment: the film is unwilling and unable to explain the implications in these implicit processes, and can only choose to avoid them.

4. Questions and Reflections

Although misreading a text seems inevitable, understanding *Ready Player One* through the theory of dual narrative processes can more effectively avoid the limitations of traditional criticism and aesthetic habits. While the film promotes the concept of freedom, autonomy, competition, and courage are actually illusions for the players. The digital spectacle in the film conceals a certain authoritative control behind it, which is a consistent means of Western blockbusters.

Similarly, the OASIS game and the company with a market value of 500 billion as an Easter egg reward are essentially symbols of capital. In this world, equality for all and free consumption are just illusions. The house as an important clue in the implicit process, as well as the succession of Halliday's power, hints at the falseness of equality.

This should prompt further reflection on the future dilemma presented by *Ready Player*

One. The metaverse world presented by the film, while seemingly glamorous as a virtual utopia, is actually a bad solution. As Halliday said, "Only in the real world can I really have a good meal," or to quote Lu Xun, "If reality can be precious" [8], then this should not be a heavy emptiness for humanity—the virtual world is an empty golden egg. It is merely a comfortable place to escape reality, a replica of the real world, and a reproduction of "absolute space" [9]. The discipline of capital and power still exists within it.

Moreover, judging from the degree of numbness that the sensory stimulation of the metaverse world brings to players and audiences, in this sense, the virtual world is even worse than the Western capitalist reality, a "dystopian" world. Therefore, standing at a time when the concept of the metaverse is booming, looking back at the dilapidated state of the stack of apartments in *Ready Player One*, we should further reflect on the important premise and parameters of the human "real world." Is it sufficient to be the basis for the explosive progress of technology? Can the development of technology be coordinated and adapted to it? If *Ready Player One* cannot be said to be an implicit warning for this, then at least it provides a negative example.

5. Conclusion

In the narrative of *Ready Player One*, the explicit plot envisions a fair and just human society, while the implicit plot, which quietly begins from the moment the protagonist leaves home at the beginning of the film and ends with the male and female protagonists kissing in the mansion, with the dilapidated scene outside the window gradually fading from the screen, runs through the entire film, silently opposing the explicit plot, exposing the superficiality of that shining golden egg. The "implicit plot" calls for breaking this empty shell and getting closer to reality.

While the explicit plot of *Ready Player One* points out the real-world problems closely related to human survival, it does not provide truly viable solutions. At the same time, the implicit plot's rebuttal of the significance of the explicit theme reveals

that the film uses the virtual reality's sensory freedom and equality to conceal the discipline and privilege of the real-world Western capitalist world. Under more new technological conditions, if people still cannot face these problems squarely, it may pose further challenges to human survival and order.

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