



ISSUE #6 | JULY 2025

Spielberg's Motifs: Humanity Seeking Deity

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Many of Steven Spielberg's films center on the creation and use of technology in dystopic near futures. In *Jurassic Park* (1993), *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* (2001), and *Ready Player One* (2018), films spanning 25 years of his career, Spielberg divides humanity into two sides: those who seek to use technology for humanitarian aims and those who use it for greed and power. Each film spotlights a powerful male lead who takes on the creator role and plays "god." Ultimately, each fails because he neglects personal responsibility and undervalues the lives of those around him. While each may appear to be a fairly conventional science-fiction narrative, Spielberg distinguishes his films through the visual motifs and techniques he uses to shift moral authority to characters who embrace these things.

In *Jurassic Park*, Spielberg dives into a battle of worldviews, pitting those who pursue science to understand nature against one whose desire is to control both. Our character of focus—park owner John Hammond—is an entrepreneur, not a scientist; his motives in playing "god" are centered around his ambition and desire for control. His fatal flaw is his lack of humility in the light of what he has used his money to create. His main foil, Ian Malcolm, a mathematician whose specialty is chaos theory, accuses Hammond of breaking the unspoken laws of nature by imposing his will on the natural order of things. The battle between them is waged most prominently, and symbolically, at a very Spielbergian setting: a dining room table. The metaphors used throughout this sequence are potent, especially for a film often dismissed as a casual blockbuster. For instance, Malcolm snaps at Hammond that "Genetic power is the most awesome force the planet's ever seen, and you wield it like a kid who's found his dad's gun."



There is no music, nothing to distract from the words being spoken. The shots are close and tightly edited, creating a claustrophobic effect to show the gravity of the exchange. “Our scientists have done what no one has ever done before,” Hammond snaps back, focusing squarely on achievement as the purpose of science. In a passionately delivered closeup, Malcolm counters with a return to its effects: “Yeah, but your scientists were so preoccupied with whether or not they could, they didn’t stop to think if they should.” He is, of course, suggesting that Hammond is not a god, but a child playing with a loaded weapon, either not understanding or refusing to acknowledge the threat behind the power he’s wielding. He is so desperate to be in control that he cannot accept losing it even when it is clearly out of his hands.



The shot-reverse-shot cuts between Hammond and Malcolm in this sequence give the audience time to digest the debate taking place about the ethical and moral obligations of the park, and they highlight how heated the discourse gets. But Spielberg's decisions throughout the sequence also, importantly, help generalize the view Malcolm articulates, rather than just centering them in another strong ego. Through blocking, Spielberg often ensures that, even when the camera focuses on the speaker, part of someone else is in the frame. At other times, he focuses on a character reacting to the speaker, while the speaker remains partially in the frame. This keeps the viewer subtly but constantly aware that there are multiple people engaged in and affected by the conversation. So, for instance,

when Malcolm insists that nature should be left alone, the take switches to a medium shot focused on Hammond's face, but with a blurred Malcolm blocking the right edge of the frame. While Hammond is in sharp focus, emphasizing his importance, Malcolm haunts his frame. This ensures that, even while the audience listens to Hammond's perspective, Malcolm's counterpoints are always lingering in their minds. Significantly, at each of the moments he is making his firmest points, Malcolm is totally alone in frame. There is none to refute him, and framing, lighting, and editing all put him in the right, but in this contest of wills, the communal setting lends important weight to his argument for social responsibility.

In the end, the plot bears this out. They do not get to open the park. The dinosaurs escape and wreak havoc. As Ellie Sattler exclaims to Hammond, still in denial later in the movie, “You’ve never had control! That’s the illusion!” Hence, the importance of the film’s ending: who makes it off the island, who escapes the violent consequences of the pursuit of power and divinity, but those who choose selflessness over greed? While each character is profoundly affected by the experience and none escape the park unscathed, those who do survive, survive because they choose to unite to protect one another. Malcolm does all he can to assist in everyone’s survival, even with a broken leg. Muldoon, who sacrifices himself to save Ellie, is honored for his bravery. Ellie, in turn,

focuses on protecting Alan, and Alan is focused on saving the kids regardless of his own life. Even Hammond ultimately chooses selflessness by focusing on saving his grandchildren. Meanwhile, both children focus on protecting one another, showing at different points that each is willing to die to save the other. When humans want power and control over things they have no business trying to control, Spielberg suggests, it leads to unnecessary loss and grief, while taking responsibility for others is precisely what has ensured human survival.

A.I.: Artificial Intelligence takes the threats of self-centeredness to the next level, exploring what happens when humans divorce technology from social responsibility and measure their successes in market shares. In this case, the god role is played by Dr. Hobby—a man who uses technology to create not just animal lifeforms, but something in his own image—“a robot who can love.” From the film’s establishing sequence, we learn that Hobby is an updated Frankenstein, full of the same ambition to create life and the conceit it takes to try. As in *Jurassic Park*, Spielberg shows how this relies on an ultimately misguided sense of being in control. “Ours will be a perfect child caught in a freeze frame, always loving, never ill, never changing” he boasts.

Alluding to the story-world’s declining population and “all the childless couples yearning in vain for a license,” his ongoing pronunciations are filled with ad-speak: “our little mecha will not only open up a new market, but will fill a great human need.” Hobby treats complicated human emotions, like curiosity or the need to be loved, as consumer desires that can be targeted to make as much money as possible regardless of any negative ethical implications.

This sequence is stylistically similar to the *Jurassic Park* dinner scene. Spielberg combines blocking and grouping techniques that establish the power held by Hobby while subtly foreshadowing the film’s final—if more disturbing—affirmation of emotion and connection. This scene unfolds with more characters in a larger space, so there are numerous slow pans and Spielbergian long takes punctuated by shorter and tighter frames and edits to stage the initial power dynamics. Again, a lack of music focuses viewer attention on dialogue for emotional resonance. The camera does not cut immediately when the speakers switch, as Spielberg uses panning, tracking, rotating, and sweeping to keep characters with lines in the shot to the side or in the background. When there is a cut, it is on character movement, and, appropriately for this sequence, it is most often drawn to Hobby, who paces before tables of his seated colleagues. He is established as the central authority; everyone else is visually and audibly reduced to background props and quiet voices to interact with him.





In this case, it is not an equal ego, but one of Hobby's employees who raises the question viewers instinctively form: "If a robot could genuinely love a person, what responsibility does that person hold toward that mecha in return? It's a moral question, isn't it?" In other words, what moral obligation do humans have to such a child, especially if that child is not technically human? In a distinctive closeup, Dr. Hobby stares the woman down with calm coolness, stating what he seems to think is the obvious answer to the question: "The oldest one of all; but in the beginning, didn't God create Adam to love Him?" The micro-expressions of this close shot allow the viewer to catch the small, barely discernible upward twitch of his mouth and the narrowing of his eyes, showing both the arrogance and the utter surety of his reply.

Most of the closeups in this part of the sequence are on a mecha, Sheila, and Dr. Hobby himself. As he replies to the woman's challenge, his face is almost perfectly divided with half in the light, half in complete shadow, symbolizing his dual nature as creator and villain, a man of ethical duplicity. This deification of self is contrasted with the stark and even harsh background lighting pouring in through the windows behind the characters, which reduces everyone to silhouettes or distinctive outlines and hides their features, foreshadowing their ultimate annihilation.

As in *Jurassic Park*, nature reasserts its authority over human control. Hobby sets himself up as a deity who has created life in his own image, but in the end, what is left? The rising seas shown in the opening shot—an already drastic sign of human failure to handle its stewardship of nature—freeze over and humanity goes extinct. The technology Hobby created outlives him, but while its imagined purpose was to serve humanity for pleasure and entertainment, what remains at the end of all things is the curiosity of the mecha specialists and the love that robot child David has for his mother. A memory, a simulation of their relationship is what Spielberg leaves his audience to dwell on. He challenges us to reflect on what could happen if our relationship to the things we make supplants our relationships with each other, and again affirms that it is human emotions and relationality that are at the root of survival.

Ready Player One shifts us inside an already-built technological vision. As the real world falls apart, people spend more of their time in a virtual-reality universe called the OASIS, where "the limits of reality are your own imagination." Unlike the other two films, which have notably darker endings, this film ends a bit more upbeat. In many ways, it could be dismissed as overly simple and comical (some characters, for example, can be hard to take seriously at points), but the underlying message of the film is something that should not be ignored. Considered as an extension of the earlier works discussed here, *Ready Player One* explores the difference between human relationality and simulated human relationality and warns against allowing technology to dominate our lives until reality becomes obsolete. The plot centers on a game-like contest to find the "golden Easter egg"

inside OASIS and inherit the fortune and power of James Halliday, the godlike architect of this sandbox world. It pits a young teenager, Wade Wilson, against the most powerful and wealthy CEO in the world, Nolan Sorrento. Not surprisingly, Sorrento falls into the same category as Hobby and Hammond: he is driven by greed and the illusion of control. Wade, ultimately victorious with the help of his friends, takes a journey of self-discovery and goes from wanting to win for selfish reasons to finding a purpose greater than himself: a way to help people reconnect to their real lives and relationships.

The end of the film highlights Spielberg's trademark long takes that follow character movement and character blocking that communicates power dynamics, but he also uses more zooms and cuts to juxtapose what's happening in the virtual realm to the scene in the real world. Inside OASIS, Wade's avatar meets with a pre-recorded avatar of Halliday, ready to claim his prize and gain control over the sandbox. Outside, an armed Sorrento is closing in on Wade's physical location to stop him. This choice doesn't just build tension: it shows how things happening in the real world outweigh what is happening in the virtual world, no matter how significant that may be.

Spielberg's cuts between the scenes are accompanied by the words Halliday speaks while fishing around in drawers absentmindedly, as if he has no idea where he placed the golden egg—a thing that both frustrates and terrifies the viewer. "I created the OASIS because I never felt at home in the real world," he says. "I just didn't know how to connect with the people there. I was afraid for all of my life. Right up until the day I knew my life was ending." As he finishes this sentence, we cut to Sorrento, gun raised, striding purposefully toward the van in which real Wade stands vulnerable. Intrinsically, the viewer connects what Halliday is saying—"the day I knew my life was ending"—with Sorrento on his way to end Wade's life. Another cut goes back to Halliday's unhurried search as he says, "Now that was when I realized that as terrifying and painful as reality can be, it's also the only place that you can get a decent meal." The shot cuts back to a closeup of Sorrento's face as he marches toward the camera, then a crowd of people surrounding him, their heads blocking parts of the shot. This blocking builds the tension by showing how even though the crowd is large, none dare to challenge him. "Because reality is real," Halliday finishes as he finds the golden egg and holds it up. "You understand what I'm saying?" He looks up at Wade



with earnest and sad sincerity. The shot cuts to a low angle showing the transfer of power taking place, looking up at Wade's avatar with Halliday on his knees offering him the egg. "Yes. Yes, I do," Wade's voice cracks with emotion as he accepts the egg with humility and wonder, his friends rejoicing at his success.



The moment is cut short by Sorrento flinging the van door open and pointing his gun inside. The kids around Wade shout, "No! Please!" and then we get an interesting cinematic choice by Spielberg: he slows things down and weaves in the Spielbergian sense of wonder, enough to stop the villain in his tracks. The camera zooms in on Sorrento's stunned face, with gun still raised, the golden light from the virtual egg spilling across his. The music swells as the camera cuts back to real Wade cupping an invisible glowing orb, with Sorrento's face and arm extended with the gun blurred but present, keeping the tension high. We get one more series of shots of virtual Wade holding the egg, staring at it with wide-eyed wonder, juxtaposed with a slow zoom to a closeup of real Wade's face, his VR goggles still on and a tear trickling down his cheek.

Combined with the music, the scene stirs a deep emotional response in the viewer's chest. This is the moment that he has worked and fought for the entire movie, and even while he is still under threat, Spielberg makes sure the audience feels its weight. Sorrento stands frozen in place, staring as the golden light flickers and falls away from his face, the camera dropping down and tilting up in a slow but constant motion so as to reveal again the crowd behind him. The corner of his mouth twitches up and down as if he wants to smile but can't. He is struck by wonder and awe, but is still in inner conflict. The music continues to swell and rise, giving a sense of victory and understanding. As the shot ends, the sound of sirens cuts in, and the audience understands that Sorrento will see justice for his crimes. The film finishes with Wade explaining that he will close the OASIS on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The final shot is of him kissing the girl he fell in love with, having learned the importance of spending time in the "real world" with those he loves.

Jurassic Park, *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*, and *Ready Player One* are cautionary tales, exploring the broader implications of technological advancement in the modern world and what it reveals about humanity. The dramatic conflict in each is tied to a powerful character who is selfish in so many ways, and yet in his effort to secure greater power and control, he ends up failing catastrophically. Each film also presents characters who demonstrate Spielberg's emphasis on how genuine relationships with others offer a way out of the cycle of power-hungry greed and technological abuse. In this way, Spielberg reminds audiences that as much as we love cinema, technology, and art, spending time with those we love is still the best course of action. This doesn't mean we can't invent, create, or explore, but there must be balance when it comes to escapism and entertainment so that it doesn't take us away from what is truly important: our relationship to one another. ☺

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