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Virtually Heroes

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Abstract

This is a film review of *Virtually Heroes* (2013) directed by G. J. Echternkamp.

Keywords

Computer Games, Virtual Reality

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Virtually Heroes

Directed by G. J. Echternkamp

(Midnight)

Like a live-action *Wreck-it Ralph*, *Virtually Heroes* explores the existential condition of being a video game character from one of their own points of view. In this delightfully silly and surprisingly reflective comedy directed by G.J. Echternkamp (and produced by horror legend Roger Corman), Sgt. Books (Robert Baker) and his sidekick Nova (Brent Chase) must face down scores of easily killable Viet Cong, rescue a pretty reporter, and stop a renegade Major Merk (Ben Messmer) all while wondering what is the point of anything they do, when it is all controlled by some teen who works at Subway. “Shit happens because some pimply kid makes it happen,” exclaims a frustrated Nova, who just wants to get on with the mission – or better, find the drug and sex laden paradise that is supposed to be hidden somewhere in the game. In fact, the more Books struggles with his crisis of meaning, the more *Virtually Heroes* becomes an outright religious allegory, dealing with theodicy, life, and death in the cruel, cruel video game world. “Remember when you starved to death because ‘God’



forgot to turn off the TV?!” Nova prods Books in an attempt to get him out of his existential funk. Clearly, this is a world subject to a negligent and uncaring divinity. Yet as they make their ways toward their programmed goal, even successfully completing the game starts to seem like a Pyrrhic victory, as it means the end of their virtual existence – “like being paused forever.” Those who look with horror at various religions’ depictions of the afterlife where all human pleasure, activity, and agency is nullified certainly can relate.

Fortunately for Books, a hooded monk (a terrific cameo not to be spoiled in this review) comes to aid him in his quest for enlightenment. The parallels between the Buddhist view of existence and video game reality have never been illustrated so clearly – or hilariously. Books asks, “I know I die, and I know I come back, but why?” to which the monk replies, “In each life, you learn from your mistakes, becoming your more perfect self.” And then he teaches Books “the song of the universe,” a mantra that takes the form of a gamer’s “cheat code” that unlocks special powers and unlimited abilities within the game world.

With nods to films from *The Matrix* to *Toy Story* to *Groundhog Day* to every action-hero war movie ever produced in the 1980s, *Virtually Heroes* is fun on many levels, but the real pleasure comes from playing around with the philosophical questions that our digital counterparts may wrestle with as we direct

their little lives into recurrent doom and an electronic limbo. To quote Nova in the heat of battling Books's demons, "Existential this!"

— Dereck Daschke