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Gamer

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Gamer

Abstract

This is a review of *Gamer* (2009).

Like similar offerings that propose the rise of neo-gladiatorial games and sports, *Gamer* is set in a new-future not far removed from the present. This is well-trod ground in science fiction cinema, but *Gamer* gives it a twist with technology-based mind control. The film centers around the wild popularity of two virtual reality games named Society and Slayers, games where people sign on to be the real-life avatars (characters) under the control of game-players at home. The games have turned reclusive genius Ken Castle (Michael C. Hall) into a billionaire, as they require his “Nanex” technology planted in people’s brains for the control and visual links. Castle’s original virtual reality called Society takes social networking games like The Sims to an extreme, with participants essentially becoming non-stop, sex slave ravers in hot pants. In the more popular game, a first-person shooter called Slayers, death row convicts serve as “i-cons” in full-scale gun battles, in the hopes of surviving 30 battles and earning their freedom.

The film follows Kable (Gerard Butler), a former soldier involved in the original mind-control experiments, who was (of course) wrongly convicted of murder. It starts with him in battle number 27 of Slayers, under the control of 17 year old Simon (Logan Lerman). Kable escapes the game with the assistance of a group of jammers known as the Humanz (Ludacris and Alison Lohman), who are resisting Castle’s growing power and the degeneration of society. Kable rescues his wife from Society and his daughter from Castle’s clutches. In the final scenes, he

learns of, and ends, Castle's plans for world domination through dust-borne Nanex with the sharp end of a knife.

As the latest product from Crank series directors Mark Neveldine and Brian Taylor, viewers should expect extreme action and violence, and *Gamer* certainly comes through on that. But this film lacks much of the dark humor that subverted the seriousness of the Crank collection. Neveldine and Taylor play it much straighter here, with the only really humorous moment near the end with Castle doing a song and dance routine with 10 convicts under his control. As with other work in this vein, *Gamer*, it seems, is meant to be a social critique, a commentary on the current state of affairs and where they might be going.

The portrayal of sex and violence is completely over the top, fully earning the film its "Restricted" rating. In scenes from *Slayers*, blood literally splashes on the screen, and the obese, sweaty, naked man controlling Kable's wife in *Society* while she trolls for sex partners appears on screen often enough to be considered a sub-plot. But the excess is part of the point. The film plumbs the potential depths of humankind's essential inhumanity with each other. Real people live and die playing *Slayers* while under the control of others, and *Society* is a futuristic Sodom and Gomorrah in no uncertain terms. Films with this sort of excess, sarcasm and parody run the risk that they do not come across as intended. The lines between critiquing society and spectacularizing that under criticism are very thin. Viewers

will have to make their own decisions as to whether *Gamer* is successful as critique or degenerates into irresponsible spectacle.

The film suggests some interesting, if largely unintended, themes about idolatry and hubris. Most visibly, Castle sets out to make himself god-like, able to control millions of people as puppet-master. His expected come-uppance is not left unsatisfied. On another level, all of the game-players of *Slayers* and *Society* are self-deifying, literally controlling the lives of others. In a rehearsal of “let my people go,” Kable pleads with Castle’s assistants to “Shut it off. It means nothing to you. It’s just a mouse click.” The Nanex technology is destroyed by pushing a couple of buttons, almost as if at whim. Beyond all of this, the film speaks to the idea of idolizing technology itself. In the tradition of dystopian science fiction, *Gamer* chews over the dangers of worshipping technology, of doing something simply because technology enables it. There are warnings here about the hubris of setting ourselves as gods with the totem of technology, and the basic loss of essential values, morals and human spirit that goes with it.

So is it worth sitting through the graphic nature of the film, the plot holes and the tendency of Butler’s character to muscle his way mutely through scene after scene? *Gamer* will cause a reaction, frequently making the viewer uncomfortable. Yet it is from these moments where thoughtfulness can occur, where the film might engage viewers with deeper issues. If one has any interest in films about futuristic

sports and games and their reflection on human nature and society, then *Gamer* should be added to the playlist.