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Virtually Heaven
Transhumanist Constructions of Christian Heaven in *Ready Player One* and *San Junipero*

“Those stories you heard? About going to a wonderful place [after you die] called ‘heaven’ where there is no more pain or death and you live forever in a state of perpetual happiness? ...total bullshit.”¹ Wade Watts, the protagonist of the 2011 novel *Ready Player One*, describes the blissful Christian afterlife in distinctly derisive terms. His scornful skepticism of Christian constructs like heaven, represent the typical stance of science fiction and media. Although some sci-fi media is created by Christians for Christians,² the vast majority tends to condemn organized religions like Christianity for being too irrational and exclusive. To promote technological rather than religious ideologies, transhumanists like Max More believe that “transhumanism (like humanism) can act as a philosophy of life that fulfills some of the same functions as a religion without any appeal to a higher power, a supernatural entity, to faith, and without the other core features of religions.”³ This message—that transhumanist technologies including immersive virtual reality (IVR) improve upon Christian belief systems—becomes reinforced within sci-fi media. However, most science-fiction depictions of IVR and many Christian accounts of heaven are too similar to ignore. Both Christian heaven and IVR separate the person living from the world they were born into. Both rely on utopian imagery, like heavenly streets paved with gold, or fantasy worlds where anything is possible. And both require those who enter to meet certain criteria. However, science fiction that features IVR tends to

¹ Ernest Cline, *Ready Player One*, 1st ed. (New York: Crown Publishers, 2011). 18.

² For example, Madeline L’Engle’s young adult novel, *A Wrinkle in Time* and C.S. Lewis’ “Cosmic Trilogy”.

³ Max More and Natasha Vita-More, *The Transhumanist Reader: Classical and Contemporary Essays on the Science, Technology, and Philosophy of the Human Future* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013): 8.

condemn Christian values, assuming that the Christian criteria for access to the Christian heaven is too limited because it excludes, for example, the entire LGBT⁴ community. In science fiction depictions of immersive virtual reality like *Ready Player One* and *San Junipero* proponents of transhumanist technologies attempt to present a utopic plane that is more accepting than Christian Heaven, but concurrently reinforce systems of structural inequity like classism, ableism, and racism.

Developing the argument above—that sci-fi depictions of IVR aren't *more* accepting than Christian heaven, but instead merely accept a *different* group—requires addressing two basic components. First, what *is* “virtual reality” and how is “immersive virtual reality” represented in science fiction? Second, how does Christian heaven work, what are the criteria for access, and what aspects of Christian views of heaven have been internalized by science fiction world-builders? Within each section I apply these scholarly frameworks to the case-studies *Ready Player One* and *San Junipero*—an episode featuring IVR from the series “Black Mirror”. After establishing the basic ideas behind IVR and heaven in modern American culture, I focus on the criteria for accessing and experiencing heaven or virtual reality to its fullest extent. Using examples from *Ready Player One* and *San Junipero*, I illustrate ways transhumanists present a utopic experience that claims to be more accepting than Christian Heaven, especially for LGBT individuals. However, transhumanist accounts tend to overlook societal exclusion or actively exclude people with low socio-economic status, people with a physical or cognitive disability, or racial minorities. By drawing attention to the paradoxical aspects of transhumanist rhetoric of broader acceptance into a heaven-like realm, I hope to encourage those interested in

⁴ In this paper, the term “LGBT” is used to denote non-heterosexual sexual orientations and non-cisgender gender identities including those who prefer to identify with LGBTQIA, or aren't encapsulated by a letter in an initialism. This paper addresses case studies primarily focused around lesbian sexual orientations.

transhumanism, Christianity, and the intersections between science and religion to address inequity on the earthly plane before perpetuating injustice in a technological utopia.

I. Immersive Virtual Reality in Science Fiction Media

The terms “virtual” and “reality” in “virtual reality” can mean dramatically different things, which makes defining virtual reality (VR) such a challenge. Addressing scholarly definitions of VR, Myron E. Krueger introduces *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality* with the observation that VR, “is a technology that can be applied to every human activity and can be used to mediate in every human transaction.”⁵ Rachel Wagner’s definition of “virtual reality” is even more succinct (and broad): VR is “any form of digital technology that involves user engagement with software via screen interface.”⁶ To narrow down these criteria, Tom Boellstorff views virtual worlds as: “(1) places, (2) inhabited by persons, and (3) enabled by online technologies.”⁷ To Mark Stephen Meadows, author of *I, Avatar*, the online role-playing game Second Life is “a virtual world, but a world nonetheless. Second Life is more like a continent or city than a game. It is a landscape, one that is populated by avatar cultures as distinct as human cultures.”⁸ These frameworks for thinking of VR emphasize the distinctions between the ‘virtual’ and the ‘real’ using language that comes primarily from technological enthusiasts, but is not as distinct from religious language as some might say.

Robert Markley’s definition of VR draws on the heavenly imagery I consider in this paper, stating that cyberspace—the platform on which VR operates—is evoked by metaphors that are “self-consciously holistic, transcendent, sublime; they attempt to describe our ‘full

⁵ Michael Heim, *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), vii.

⁶ Rachel Wagner, *Godwired: Religion, Ritual, and Virtual Reality*, Religion, Media, and Culture Series (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012). 1.

⁷ Tom Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). 17.

⁸ Mark Stephen Meadows, *I, Avatar: The Culture and Consequences of Having a Second Life*, Voices That Matter (Berkeley, CA: New Riders, 2008). 26.

human sensorium’.”⁹ This use of spiritualized language indicates that connections between Christian depictions of heaven and VR have precedent in both scholarly and popular works. Yet Krueger, Wagner, Boellstorff, Meadows, and Markley consider *real* virtual realities, grounded in technologies that actually exist and engage with living people. As this deluge of definitions would suggest, there is plenty of research on modern VR. What this paper addresses are depictions of *virtual* reality that are not constrained by *actual* reality—those found in science-fiction media.

The accounts of VR in sci-fi works tend to look a little different than what is actually functioning in the world today because authors and directors are not constrained by real technological limitations. Consequently, these depictions of VR tend to be even more fantastical than those engaged by scholars like Heim, Wagner, and Boellstorff. This paper narrows the working-definition of “Immersive Virtual Reality” to only digital/digital-equivalent based interfaces in which the human subject is immersed in a complete sensory experience in the virtual world. The classic example of an IVR like this would be the completely-immersive VR platform in the 1999 movie, *The Matrix*, in which characters that are plugged into “the Matrix” are completely unaware of their “real” physical bodies and the “real” world outside.¹⁰ Under this more limited definition, Second Life does *not* qualify as an immersive virtual reality because Meadows—the human operator of the Second Life avatar—could feasibly sit at his computer smelling, tasting, and experiencing what it’s like to eat pizza while his Second Life avatar battles another Second Life avatar. It is less reasonable to compare Meadows’ Second Life VR to Christian heaven because in Meadows’ experience there is no equivalent to death or an earthly transcendence that allows for a delineation between the realities of being alive in the non-digital

⁹ Robert Markley, *Virtual Realities and Their Discontents* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). 3.

¹⁰ *The Matrix*, directed by the Wachowski Brothers (1999; Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers, 1999), DVD.

interface and the virtual reality. For example, when the *Matrix* character Trinity plugs into the Matrix, *all* of her subsequent experiences (before disconnecting) are in the IVR interface, just as *all* of a heaven-bound Christian's experiences after death are in heaven.

Why is it important that there be a transcendent moment in connection to an IVR system? My argument here is that by making the virtual world *transcendent*, sci-fi creators buy into the most obvious Christian criteria for access to heaven—death. Gary Scott Smith opens his book *Heaven in the American Imagination* with an anonymous quote that reads: “During a children’s sermon at an evangelical church, the director of children’s ministries asked, ‘What do you have to do to go to heaven?’ She, like most of the congregation, expected one of the children to answer, ‘Accept Jesus as your savior.’ Instead, a little boy responded, ‘Be dead.’”¹¹ The idea of there being a transcendent moment—plugging in, activating the IVR with a vocal command or the press of a button, connecting consciousness to the IVR platform—reflects the Christian concept that the first criteria for entering heaven is to completely disconnect from the external, physical, earthly world.

Further examples of narrowly defined sci-fi IVR systems include William Gibson’s platform “The Sprawl” in the novel *Neuromancer*,¹² Ray Bradbury’s VR play-room in the short story “The Veldt,” or “The Grid” in Steven Lisberger’s 1982 film *Tron*. In each of these examples there exists a clear separation between the VR interface and the rest of the world whether the split is initiated by plugging in, walking into a room, or being downloaded. Michael Heim summarizes how in IVR, “the user feels the body to be ‘meat,’ or a chiefly passive material component of cyberspace, while the on-line mind lives blissfully on its own.”¹³

¹¹ Gary Scott Smith, *Heaven in the American Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), vii.

¹² “The transition to cyberspace, when he hit the switch, was instantaneous” and completely immersive. William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (New York: ACE Books, 1984): 56.

¹³ Heim, *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality*. 134.

The two IVR accounts addressed in-depth in this paper are Ernest Cline’s *Ready Player One* and Charlie Brooker’s Netflix Black Mirror episode *San Junipero*¹⁴. Like the interfaces in other sci-fi accounts described above, both the OASIS interface in *Ready Player One* and the San Junipero interface in *San Junipero* completely immerse the human operator into the virtual world until the simulation either ends or the operator chooses to disconnect.¹⁵ Both simulations present a world very different from the “real” world depicted in the sci-fi story. Cline and the creators of Black Mirror not only take pains to distinguish their created virtual worlds from their actual worlds, but also end up with versions of the “real” world that look very different from each other. For example, the polluted, crime-filled, “declining” reality of *Ready Player One* is a stark contrast against a well-established and extensively developed IVR platform—the OASIS. The OASIS features entire planets of fantasy creatures, space ships, customized merchandise, and as much entertainment as humanity could think up. Alternatively, the day to day “reality” of characters in the episode *San Junipero* is a high-tech, glass-and-metal experience contrasting against the VR town of San Junipero, which is almost indistinguishable from a run-of-the-mill southern California party-town set in any time between 1980 and 2010.

When introducing the OASIS in *Ready Player One*, Cline uses Wade’s voice to describe the VR interface as “a massively multiplayer online game that had gradually evolved into the globally networked virtual reality most of humanity now used on a daily basis.”¹⁶ When describing the structure and history of the OASIS’s development, the virtual reality is presented as a system that “elevated the MMO [massively multiplayer online game] concept to an entirely

¹⁴ Charlie Brooker, *Black Mirror: San Junipero* directed by Owen Harris (2016; Netflix, 2016), Episode: Series 3, Episode 4.

¹⁵ It could be argued that this ability to disconnect from the VR makes VR *unlike* Christian heaven, but the presence of a transcendent moment—the connection/download/immersion *into* the interface—is similar to Christian views of death in that only *one* entity, whether called the human operator or the human soul, transcends.

¹⁶ Cline, *Ready Player One*, 2.

new level.”¹⁷ According to Wade, “the OASIS was an online utopia, a holodeck for the home.” These descriptions summon rhetoric that might also be associated with a transcendent, utopian plane of existence, much like the descriptions of heaven.

In *San Junipero*, viewers are given no introduction into the idea of a virtual world as the narrative plunges viewers straight into a club from the eighties, following two young women—Yorkie and Kelly. As the story progresses, idiosyncrasies in language, scenery, and time slowly suggest to the viewer that this presentation may not be completely “real.” Eventually, viewers are exposed to a world featuring self-driving cars, architecturally post-modern retirement homes, and a little white button that somehow connects seniors to a virtual world. In San Junipero—the coastal town the VR platform is set in—the seniors get to experience what it is like to feel young again because “it prevents Alzheimers, they say.”¹⁸ The system is also a boon for Yorkie, who was in a car accident at the age of 21 and has been quadriplegic for forty years. Her nurse, Greg, explains, “it’s been her whole lifetime, basically. So the whole San Junipero system has been a big deal for her. The biggest deal.”¹⁹ Both of these IVR platforms—the OASIS and San Junipero—sound like excellent places to go to escape the otherwise dismal “real” experiences like Wade’s collapsing, polluted society and Yorkie’s quadriplegic physical body, but that doesn’t automatically associate these fictitious IVR platforms with Christian heaven.

Case Study: San Junipero and the OASIS as Heavenly Planes

The connections between the OASIS and San Junipero and heaven are presented in both subtle and overt ways. The most clearly drawn relationship is when, at the end of *San Junipero*, Kelly and Yorkie drive away into their happy ending in the IVR platform to the 1987 Belinda

¹⁷ Cline, *Ready Player One*, 57.

¹⁸ *San Junipero*, 43:33.

¹⁹ *San Junipero*, 42:21.

Carlisle song, “Heaven is a Place on Earth.” The clear implication is that being uploaded into the IVR system of San Junipero, or “passing over” is equivalent to experiencing heaven. Earlier in the episode, when Kelly is discussing the interface, Yorkie’s nurse, Greg, says that Yorkie is “scheduled to pass” into the San Junipero interface permanently. To which Kelly replies, “scheduled to pass, let’s just call it dying.” Greg answers, “if you can call it dying.” Kelly adds “uploaded to the cloud, *sounds like heaven.*”²⁰ These instances are intentional creative choices that encourage the viewer to reflect on the nature of heaven and how San Junipero might be considered a similar, or even equivalent, transcendent plane.

The San Junipero system is not the only IVR construct described in heavenly terms. Wade, in *Ready Player One*, after describing the grimness of his “real” life, says, “luckily, I had access to the OASIS, which was like having an escape hatch into a better reality.”²¹ Although this alone does not sound as close to “heaven” as “utopia”, Wade uses more religious-sounding language when he describes how, “the OASIS was what people had been dreaming of for decades. The ‘virtual reality’ they had been promised for so long was finally here, and it was even better than they'd imagined.”²² Echoing the kind of language Christians tend to use to describe their own heaven, Cline draws parallels between the OASIS and a heavenly realm. Just like the OASIS, heaven is a place as real as the earth, but better (a “better reality”); heaven is a place Christians can feel safe and loved; and heaven is the place Christians dream of going to—often for decades—when they die.

²⁰ *San Junipero*, 43:12. Emphasis added.

²¹ Cline, *Ready Player One*. 18.

²² Cline, *Ready Player One*, 58-59.

II. Christian Heaven in the Modern Imagination

J. Edward Wright opens the preface to his book *The Early History of Heaven* with an acknowledgement of the dominant understanding of heaven as being associated with “positive, blissful images...where God is and where good people go after death to receive their reward for having lived noble lives.”²³ Some recurring features in understandings of heaven include the “verdant garden” or “paradise”, the presence of holy or angelic beings, and the Christian image of heaven as an exclusive club for righteous Christians only.²⁴ Later developments in the Christian view of Heaven tracked through the accounts of Ptolemy, Constantine, Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, and later saints, eventually describing heaven as “a vast place of inestimable beauty where time ceases and where the righteous are enveloped in the love of God.”²⁵

Engaging a more modern perspective on specifically American understandings of heaven, Gary Scott Smith draws attention to many of the paradoxical accounts of what heaven will look like. Smith asks, “Is it a place of continuous worship or a perpetual playground? Is it a realm of eternal rest or of vigorous activity? Is it a site of static perfection or of everlasting progress?”²⁶ Today, some people understand heaven through mainline Christian religious texts and sermons but far more construct their views from “movies, television, novels, ‘residual messages from parents, grandparents and Sunday school lessons—and especially...their own individual

²³ J. Edward Wright, *The Early History of Heaven* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). Vii. The majority of Wright’s text is devoted to analyzing the history of how this idea developed, from Ancient Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Israelite, Persian, Greek, Roman, and later Jewish and Christian traditions all the way to Carl Sagan’s *Cosmos* providing context for this paper’s discussion of modern depictions of heaven.

²⁴ Wright, *The Early History of Heaven*, 196. Wright notes that early Christians tended to view heavenly “citizenship” more closely tied to their Christian identity while Jewish worldviews often emphasized the importance of being righteous and “earning” a place in heaven. Modern Jewish traditions often de-emphasize the image of heaven and focus on encouraging ethical behavior in this world.

²⁵ Wright, *The Early History of Heaven*, 210.

²⁶ Smith, *Heaven in the American Imagination*, vii.

experiences of transcendence.”²⁷ In the dazzling twenty-first century, Americans have adapted their view of heaven dramatically. According to Smith, Americans have “disagreed about the nature of the afterlife and the grounds for admission to heaven...cultural trends and norms led many to view engaging in entertainment, attaining self-understanding, and achieving personal happiness as much more important in paradise than worshipping and serving God.”²⁸

For most Christians, heaven was and is to this day the ultimate objective, however, “since each community develops its own ideas about how one could reach this goal, the accounts of what is required for admission differ from community to community.”²⁹ In most Christian constructs, heaven’s blissful paradise of indescribable beauty and joyful union with God is only accessible to a select few. Matthew 7: 21 reads: “Not everyone who says to me ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.”³⁰ To most Christian groups a person will be admitted to heaven, “only by accepting Jesus Christ as their savior and Lord.”³¹ For example, the Christian website “AllAboutGOD.com” states, “the truth is that there is only one way for any human being to get to heaven and that is to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.”³² Most Christian websites that align with the view that divine grace is the only way to access heaven quote passages within Ephesians 2 including: “But God, who is rich in mercy...raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness...For by grace you have been

²⁷ Smith, *Heaven in the American Imagination*, ix. Note that modern descriptions of heaven often look very different from depictions presented by the Puritans, the Victorians, or even accounts from the 1960s.

²⁸ Smith, *Heaven in the American Imagination*, 226.

²⁹ Wright, *The Early History of Heaven*, 210.

³⁰ Harold W. Attridge, Wayne A. Meeks, Jouette M. Bassler, *The Harper Collins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Including Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2006): 1680.

³¹ Smith, *Heaven in the American Imagination*, 6.

³² “How To Get To Heaven,” AllAboutGod, 2002, <http://www.allaboutgod.com/how-to-get-to-heaven.htm>.

saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”³³ Other Christians believe that “good works will get them to heaven...if their good deeds outweigh their bad ones on God’s eternal scale, God will reward them with eternal life.”³⁴ According to one Pew Forum survey in 2008, Americans in general and Christians specifically were fairly evenly divided when asked if good deeds or Christian faith would grant them admittance to heaven.³⁵

The criteria for access to Christian heaven become even more complicated when considering LGBT entree. In many Christian Bibles printed between 1946 and 1971, the term “homosexuals” appears “in a list of sinners barred—according to a verse in the Apostles Paul’s first epistle to the Corinthians—from inheriting the kingdom of God.”³⁶ In Heather White’s *Reforming Sodom: Protestants and the Rise of Gay Rights*, White illustrates how “today’s antihomosexual animus...is not the singular residue of an ancient damnation. Rather, it is the product of a more complex modern synthesis.”³⁷ This complex contextual picture is further demonstrated using statistics and personal testimonies. According to a 2015 article in the Pew Research Forum, “a solid majority of white mainline Protestants (62%) now favor allowing gays and lesbians to wed, with just 33% opposed.”³⁸ Some Christian churches generate statements like this example from Bible.org:

Because salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone and we are not saved by our works good or bad, yes, a homosexual person can go to heaven. Having said this, however, there is always the question of whether such a person has faced their sin and truly put their trust in Christ. If they

³³ Attridge et. al, *The Harper Collins Study Bible*, 1985.

³⁴ Smith, *Heaven in the American Imagination*, 6.

³⁵ Smith, *Heaven in the American Imagination*, 219.

³⁶ Heather White, *Reforming Sodom: Protestants and the Rise of Gay Rights* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015): 1. Citing I Corinthians 6:9-10, Revised Standard Version: “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God.” White notes that “homosexuals” was changed to “sexual perverts” in this version in 1971.

³⁷ White, *Reforming Sodom*, 3-4.

³⁸ David Masci and Michael Lipka, “Where Christian Churches, Other Religions Stand on Gay Marriage,” *Pew Research Center*, December 21, 2015, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/12/21/where-christian-churches-stand-on-gay-marriage/>.

have, then to continue with a homosexual lifestyle is living in rebellion and a believer will eventually experience misery and divine discipline.³⁹

However, many Christians opposed to homosexuality are exceedingly *vocal* in their opposition, generating a popular image in American media that “Christianity” as a single unit opposes homosexuality⁴⁰ and therefore, exclude LGBT individuals from heaven. At this point, it is vital to remember that Christian considerations of LGBT access to heaven are diverse and nuanced. Having established some relevant aspects of Christian views of heaven, I now explore some transhumanist constructions of a technological heavenly realm.

Transhumanist Heaven

In *The Transhumanist Reader*, More describes how “becoming posthuman means exceeding the limitations that define the less desirable aspects of the ‘human condition’.”⁴¹ These aspects include disease, aging, inevitable death, a single form, limited cognition, and unruly emotion—a posthuman can, “by thoughtfully, carefully, and yet boldly applying technology...become something no longer accurately described as human.”⁴² Downloading or uploading human consciousness into an IVR construct—one that typically has similar characteristics to Christian heaven—embodies one aspect of the activity that most posthumanists consider to be posthumanism. There is disagreement, of course, about whether IVR embodies a posthuman mentality; Boellstorff argues that “the relationship between the virtual and the human is not a ‘post’ relationship where one term displaces another; it’s a relationship of coconstruction...*it is in being virtual that we are human*. Virtual worlds reconfigure selfhood

³⁹ “Can a Homosexual Enter into the Kingdom of Heaven? | Bible.org,” Copyright 2017, <https://bible.org/question/can-homosexual-enter-kingdom-heaven>.

⁴⁰ For example, the Westboro Baptist Church encourages picketing against LGBT lifestyle, vocally generating an image in the media that—according to their beliefs, which many Americans apply to Christianity in general—“God hates [LGBT individuals].”

⁴¹ Max More and Natasha Vita-More, *The Transhumanist Reader: Classical and Contemporary Essays on the Science, Technology, and Philosophy of the Human Future* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013): 4.

⁴² More and Vita-More, *The Transhumanist Reader*, 4.

and sociality, but this is only possible because they rework the virtuality that characterizes human being in the actual world.”⁴³ For this discussion of VR in sci-fi, the nature of virtual humanity/posthumanity matters less than conceptions of *how* VR interface develops what it means to be human—in this case in terms of what it means to go to heaven.

According to More, “the content of some religious beliefs is easier to reconcile with transhumanism than the content of others.”⁴⁴ For example, More indicates that he’s familiar with Buddhist, Jewish, and Mormon transhumanists, but “Christian transhumanists, while not completely unknown, are very rare.”⁴⁵ This passage indicates one of the ways transhumanism perpetuates subtle prejudice against Christianity—a prejudice that manifests more clearly in the case studies examined in depth later in the paper. In More’s “A Letter to Mother Nature,” he outlines the human condition in three succinct paragraphs and proceeds with a list of seven amendments. The first amendment reads as follows: “We will no longer tolerate the tyranny of aging and death. Through genetic alterations, cellular manipulations, synthetic organs, and *any necessary means*, we will endow ourselves with enduring vitality and remove our expiration date. We will each decide for ourselves how long we shall live.”⁴⁶ One of these “necessary means” appears to be forms of IVR like the kind depicted in *San Junipero* and *Ready Player One*.

Although More’s writings suggest that transhumanists think little of current organized religions, not all transhumanists are blind to the similarities their own beliefs and practices share with some aspects of Christianity. Giulio Prisco writes in “Transcendent Engineering” that “good

⁴³ Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life*, 29. Original emphasis.

⁴⁴ More and Vita-More, *The Transhumanist Reader*, 8.

⁴⁵ More, *The Transhumanist Reader*, 8. In this quote, More is likely referring to mainline or evangelical Christianity as Mormonism is, to most Mormons, a Christian organization.

⁴⁶ More, *The Transhumanist Reader*, 450. Emphasis added.

interpretations of religion have done great good to many people, and following William James (1896) I think a modern transhumanist religion, with religion's contemplation of transcendence and hope in personal resurrection, but without its bigotry and intolerance, can be a powerfully positive force in the life of a person."⁴⁷ Similarly, Robert Geraci acknowledges that one sub-category of transhumanist philosophy—Apocalyptic AI—"advocates hope to escape a fundamentally dualistic world in favor of a transcendent reality to come."⁴⁸ With regard to IVR specifically, Geraci describes how "virtual reality becomes the sacred world of meaning, the world that many [VR] users wish to occupy full time."⁴⁹ He argues, further, that "Apocalyptic AI influences so many people and has so many effects because it impressively integrates the two most significant areas in modern life: religion and technology."⁵⁰ Between More's religious-sounding rhetoric of transcendence through transhumanism, and Prisco and Geraci's explicit connections between religious and transhumanist movements, it is easy to see similarities in the ideological groundings for transhumanist IVR and Christian heaven. The question then becomes: why do transhumanists see their worldview as *superior* to Christian belief systems? I argue that one aspect of this belief in the superiority of transhumanism manifests when transhumanists claim to be more accepting of identities they see as ostracized by most Christian groups, specifically, LGBT individuals.

III. Immersive Virtual Heaven Welcomes LGBT People!

Science fiction likes to consider itself a progressive genre. Technology develops past reality and takes progressive values with it. In sci-fi literature, these progressive values take a

⁴⁷ Giulio Prisco, "Transcendent Engineering" in *The Transhumanist Reader*, 238.

⁴⁸ Robert M. Geraci, *Apocalyptic AI: Visions of Heaven in Robotics, Artificial Intelligence, and Virtual Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010): 139.

⁴⁹ Geraci, *Apocalyptic AI*, 140.

⁵⁰ Geraci, *Apocalyptic AI*, 143.

variety of forms, but most authors share “a commitment to issues of ethics and social justice that have long haunted human society and that may be amplified by its posthuman successors.”⁵¹ IVR specifically is thought to even the playing-field for historically minoritized groups as “an intellectual feast to which we are all invited, an intellectual frontier that we are all free to explore and invent.”⁵² This invention often includes creating a transcendent utopia that is more accepting than Christian heaven. As discussed earlier, this acceptance is often applied to the LGBT community—a group that many transhumanists and sci-fi writers see as marginalized from Christianity. In the following case studies, I engage the ways in which sci-fi accounts of IVR worlds present themselves as more accepting of LGBT individuals than Christian heaven.

Case Study: Christian Discrimination Against LGBT Characters

Both *Ready Player One* and *San Junipero* feature LGBT characters in central roles and imply that these characters would be worse-off if they did not have the IVR platform to engage. In both cases—though in not every IVR sci-fi depiction—the LGBT character’s desire to seek a transcendent alternative is implied to be the result of Christian prejudice against LGBT individuals.

In *Ready Player One*, the reader spends most of the story assuming Wade’s best friend—Aech (pronounced “h”)—is a young white man as his avatar’s design would imply. Toward the end of the book, it is revealed that Aech is not only a young Black woman, but is also living in a trailer featuring solar-panels to power the IVR connection that allows her to earn money in the OASIS. When Wade and Aech/Helen discuss how she came to be living in the trailer, her account was described as follows:

⁵¹ Lisa Yaszek and Jason W. Ellis, “Science Fiction” in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Posthuman*, Cambridge Companions to Literature. Ed. Bruce Clarke Manuela Rossini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017): 71.

⁵² Heim, *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality*, vii.

Aech told me that she hadn't seen or spoken to her mother since leaving home on her eighteenth birthday. That was the day Aech had finally come out to her mother about her sexuality. At first, her mother refused to believe she was gay. But then Helen revealed that she'd been dating a girl she met online for nearly a year.

...

“How did your mother react when she found out you had a girlfriend?” I asked.

“Well, it turns out that my mother had her own deep-seated prejudices,” Aech said. “She kicked me out of the house and said she never wanted to see me again.”⁵³

This account demonstrates how sci-fi writing gives LGBT individuals who would not be accepted into their worldly Christian communities the opportunity to be welcomed within an IVR platform. Thus, a proponent of IVR might say that everyone—including LGBT individuals—would be better off by engaging in IVR instead of Christianity.

San Junipero features similar examples, following the romance between two cisgender women in the San Junipero interface. However, their relationship does intersect with the “reality” depicted. After meeting in the virtual interface, Kelly asks to meet Yorkie in the real world, and is surprised when she discovers that Yorkie has been quadriplegic for over forty years. Yorkie’s nurse explains to Kelly how Yorkie became quadriplegic, stating, “one night, she’s 21, comes out to her folks. They’re a little uptight about it, you might say. They told her they don’t want a gay daughter. It’s not natural and so forth. They fight. She gets in her car. Runs it off the road. Boom!”⁵⁴ Furthermore, now that Yorkie *is* quadriplegic, her family won’t respect her wish to “pass over” into full-time virtual reality. Greg explains that Yorkie has to be married—and her spouse has to sign off because, “the state’s got a triple lockdown on euthanasia cases. You gotta have a sign-off from the doc, the patient, a family member...Yorkie’s family, they’re big-time religious and will not sign.”⁵⁵ Because Yorkie is a white American, it’s assumed that “big-time religious” refers to a more conservative Christian organization that would refuse

⁵³ Cline, *Ready Player One*, 321.

⁵⁴ *San Junipero*, 42:04.

⁵⁵ *San Junipero*, 42:55.

to accept a lesbian or gay individual into their heavenly construct. In this case, downloading/uploading into San Junipero is Yorkie's only chance of having a heavenly, transcendent experience.

In both examples, technological enthusiasts suggest that the "real" world is heavily influenced by *Christian driven* homophobia, and that a better alternative for LGBT transcendence would be within a virtual reality like the OASIS or San Junipero. This construct sounds like an excellent utopian alternative for LGBT individuals on the surface. However, the intersections of identities carried, not only by *real* members of the LGBT community, but also by the *characters* featured in these case studies complicate transhumanists' idealistic message saying IVR is more accepting than Christian heaven.

IV. Minorities Need Not Apply

Robert Markley introduces *Virtual Realities and Their Discontents* with call to action demanding that those who would be critical of the human condition—I'm sure he would have called them transhumanists if the term had been coined when he wrote—

must engage in a skeptical treatment of the rhetoric of the 'new' that is endemic to both academic and popular writing on cyberspace, postmodernism, and late capitalism...it is only by understanding virtual technologies within the histories that cyberspace seeks to deny or transcend that we can begin to dream of a different kind of 'real'.⁵⁶

Ernest Cline and Charlie Brooker have clearly internalized, consciously or unconsciously, Markley's call to contextualize cyberspace technologies and use science fiction to begin addressing issues of injustices they perceive in the world. For this, sci-fi creators and advocates for transhumanist technologies should be congratulated! However, although they do a great job portraying utopias where LGBT people are accepted, these narratives neglect or avoid other

⁵⁶ Markley, *Virtual Realities and Their Discontents*, 9-10.

issues of social justice that would be perpetuated in the virtual worlds. When More addresses ethics and morals associated with transhumanism, he argues, “transhumanists typically adopt a universal standard based not on membership in the human species but on the qualities of each being...the meta-ethical basis for making moral decisions and according rights can be consequentialist, deontological, or virtue based.”⁵⁷ Stephen Garner addresses the similarities and differences between Christian social concern and transhumanist practices. He argues that “while one might be positive about new [technological] developments this must be nuanced by a rejection of overt technological optimism.”⁵⁸ Although finding evidence of what is *lacking* in transhumanist considerations of social justice is inherently more difficult than finding evidence of what is present, the following sections will demonstrate some of the ways transhumanists and writers who engage transhumanist concepts like IVR ignore, gloss over, or generate unsatisfactory resolutions to issues of injustices like classism, ableism, and racism within virtual utopian constructs.

Poor People Need Not Apply

In Christian heaven, Christians can find fulfillment without socio-economic means. According to Jesus in Matthew 19:23, “truly I tell you, it will be difficult for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven.”⁵⁹ Yet economic success is a key requirement for access to transhumanist technologies. Practically, it is obvious to anyone who develops virtual reality technologies that these interfaces will be expensive systems. Today, the Oculus Rift—the closest thing to the IVR depicted in sci-fi works—costs anywhere between \$600 and \$1,000.⁶⁰ Even in

⁵⁷ More and Vita-More, *The Transhumanist Reader*, 13.

⁵⁸ Stephen Garner, “Transhumanism and Christian Social Concern,” *Journal of Evolution and Technology* 14, no. 2 (2005): 37.

⁵⁹ Harold et. al, *The Harper Collins Study Bible*, 1701.

⁶⁰ <https://www.oculus.com/rift/>

idealized fictional accounts, the price of IVR is acknowledged as a factor, even if creators choose not to acknowledge cost as a *barrier* to participation.

In *San Junipero*, issues of class are not addressed openly, but the “real” world Kelly and Yorkie inhabit are typically associated with economically successful individuals. For example, Kelly resides (in reality) at the Sienna Trust Assisted Living facility—a modern-looking glass and concrete establishment overlooking a lovely desert oasis.⁶¹ In both Kelly and Yorkie’s facilities, rooms are clean, often white, and show no sign of wear. Kelly is almost always shown with the same nurse, suggesting that the facility has a very low nurse to resident ratio, or that Kelly can afford a private nurse. Consequently, viewers infer that this technology would not be accessible to someone living in a less-well-off assisted living facility. While money is not required *within* the virtual world (wedding dresses can be manifested with a thought) the experiences characters have within the IVR reflect experiences that individuals with at least middle-class socio-economic status could have had in reality. *San Junipero*, avoids the question of whether or not a person with low socio-economic status can access and thrive within an immersive virtual reality by portraying the kind of world many Black Mirror viewers would be accustomed to—that of a socio-economically well-off individual.

Ready Player One engages the question of wealth within IVR very differently. Because the main character begins the book in a trailer that “reeked of cat piss and abject poverty”⁶² Cline has to deal with *how* people of all economic levels can access the OASIS. He describes how the OASIS designers “only charged a onetime sign-up fee of *twenty-five cents*, for which you received a lifetime OASIS account.”⁶³ However, this does not imply that people with low socio-

⁶¹ *San Junipero*, 38:21.

⁶² Cline, *Ready Player One*, 13.

⁶³ Cline, *Ready Player One*, 59. Original emphasis.

economic status were able to be successful *within* the system. The company that created the OASIS profited enormously by selling virtual land, objects, vehicles, clothing, furniture, houses, flying cars, magic swords and machine guns which, though technically “nothing but ones and zeros stored on the OASIS servers...were also status symbols.”⁶⁴ Throughout the story, one of the struggles the protagonists must overcome is their inability to do certain things within the OASIS due to their low socio-economic status. Eventually, the characters earn and win enough money to become extremely wealthy, and the implication is that *now* they can be successful.⁶⁵ Are transhumanist technologies like IVR truly better for individuals with low socio-economic status when they exclude or limit the participation of those without financial means?

People With Disabilities Need Not Apply

Transhumanists have often been critiqued for insensitivity to issues of *physical* disability. For example, Ivo Van Hilvoorde and Laurens Landeweerd highlight in “Enhancing Disabilities: Transhumanism Under the Veil of Inclusion” that “the problem with transhumanism is that in its desire to improve upon mankind, it may lead to an increase in the division between the ‘tech-rich’ and the ‘tech-poor’...an increase rather than decrease of equality”⁶⁶ specifically with regard to physical ability. When considering the heavenly aspects of IVR, I argue that *mental* disability becomes equally if not even more relevant than physical ability.

Ready Player One does not engage considerations of physical ability. This *lack* of discussion is significant in and of itself. For example, connecting to the OASIS requires a visor and gloves. There is no indication that accommodations exist for individuals who are blind, or

⁶⁴ Cline *Ready Player One*, 59.

⁶⁵ Cline, *Ready Player One*, 363. “The bastard will probably get off scot-free,” I said. “IOI [the antagonist] can afford to hire the best lawyers in the world.” “Yes, they can,” Aech said. Then he flashed his Cheshire grin. “*But now so can we.*”

⁶⁶ Ivo Van Hilvoorde and Laurens Landeweerd, “Enhancing Disabilities: Transhumanism Under the Veil of Inclusion,” *Disability and Rehabilitation* 33, no. 26 (2010): 2224.

cannot use their hands. There is no indication that accommodations exist for individuals with mental disabilities including autism, schizophrenia, or even Alzheimer's. Within the IVR, none of the characters are anything less than fully physically and mentally able. Yet people in modern reality work (with varying degrees of success) to integrate individuals with mental and physical disabilities into society while transhumanists seek to transcend. Wade describes how much of his primary and secondary education he received through the IVR interface.⁶⁷ Correspondingly, how will students who can't—because of a mental or neurological disability—connect to the IVR interface receive an education? Even more significantly, Wade describes how the OASIS, and the activities within the system gave him “a goal and a purpose. A quest to fulfill. A reason to get up in the morning. Something to look forward to.”⁶⁸ What equivalent accommodations could be made for someone who does not have the ability to connect to the immersive virtual reality in the same way?

Within the IVR of San Junipero, everyone is able-bodied and able-minded. To connect, a small white device is stuck on the right side of the head and with the push of a button, the old and frail—like Kelly—become young and the quadriplegic—like Yorkie—can skip along the beach. However, why should a transhumanist construction stop there? When describing physical abilities, van Hilvoorde and Landeweerd observe that, “in the case of disabilities, one wants to eradicate abnormalities by equalizing on the basis of ‘sameness’, while in the case of super-abilities, we support abnormalities.”⁶⁹ So should Yorkie be able to *fly* in the virtual world? Most transhumanists would enthusiastically say ‘yes’! Max More’s “Amendment No. 5” to “Mother Nature” reads: “We will no longer be slaves to our genes... We will fix all individual and species

⁶⁷ Cline, *Ready Player One*, 28.

⁶⁸ Cline, *Ready Player One*, 19.

⁶⁹ Ivo Van Hilvoorde and Laurens Landeweerd, “Enhancing Disabilities: Transhumanism Under the Veil of Inclusion,” 2226.

defects left over from evolution by natural selection.”⁷⁰ Yet within the IVR construct of San Junipero, it doesn’t seem as if these “defects” have been “fixed” so much as forgotten or ignored. As in *Ready Player One*, there does not seem to be infrastructure for handling disability *within* the virtual reality, and even less consideration given to how to accommodate individuals with disabilities that prevent them from fully accessing IVR technologies. What would a technological utopia that could accommodate those with both physical *and* mental disabilities look like?

People of Color Need Not Apply

According to current sci-fi media, even virtual realities that are more accepting than Christian heaven would look exceedingly white. Transhumanists choose not to talk much about race, and I might argue that this is because many of the most vocal are—unsurprisingly—white.⁷¹ With growing interest in VR technologies and video game interfaces, a growing number of studies are beginning to focus on race. For example, one 2013 study suggested that “putting yourself in the skin of a black avatar reduces implicit racial bias”⁷² and a growing number of people are interested in the role identity tourism plays in the influence of virtual worlds on modern societies.⁷³ With this in mind, most virtual realities imagined in science fiction are extremely whitewashed.

For example, in the San Junipero IVR interface, the only person of color present in the entire episode was Kelly, a black woman. In reality, both Kelly and Yorkie’s nurses were white. Yorkie herself, Kelly’s lover, was white. Within the IVR, Kelly and Yorkie interact with not

⁷⁰ More and Vita-More, *The Transhumanist Reader*, 450.

⁷¹ Some of these include Max More, Natasha Vita-More, Nick Bostrom, Ray Kurzweil, and even Hans Moravec.

⁷² Tabitha C. Peck et al., “Putting Yourself in the Skin of a Black Avatar Reduces Implicit Racial Bias,” *Consciousness and Cognition* 22, no. 3 (September 2013): 779–87, doi:10.1016/j.concog.2013.04.016.

⁷³ Lisa Nakamura. “Race in/for cyberspace: Identity tourism and racial passing on the Internet.” *Works and Days* 25, no. 26 (1995): 13-21.

only no other Black characters, but *no characters of color at all!* Furthermore, Kelly's high socio-economic status allowed her, in many ways, to integrate into white institutions like the high-class assisted living facility *and* the San Junipero IVR. Although the episode *San Junipero* did encourage the viewer to consider race within the virtual reality, I am not satisfied with the idea that a technological utopia will only be full of white people!

Yet Ernest Cline suggests that technological utopia might be. When the main Black character, Aech, is discussing her childhood Wade recounts how in Aech's mother's opinion, "the OASIS was the best thing that had ever happened to both women and people of color. From the very start, Marie had used a white male avatar to conduct all of her online business, because of the marked difference it made in how she was treated and the opportunities she was given."⁷⁴ When Aech follows suit, the OASIS is now inhabited by *two* avatars reinforcing the normalcy of whiteness in a technological utopia. Perhaps this is a good thing for traditionally marginalized identities because people of color would have an opportunity to experience acceptance into majority-white culture. However, perpetuating the *normalcy* and *rightness* of white society could have even further detrimental effects on racial minorities; perpetuating the norms of othering, fetishizing, and excluding people of color is not reflective of true utopia.

The question these examples of classism, ableism, and racism in *San Junipero* and *Ready Player One* raise is: Are transhumanist constructions of immersive virtual reality *really* more accepting than Christian Heaven? Could transhumanist utopias be improved even more? What would transhumanism gain by making their technological heaven accessible to not only LGBT individuals, but also those with low socio-economic status, individuals with physical or mental disabilities, and people of color?

⁷⁴ Cline, *Ready Player One*, 320.

V. Avoiding Injustice in Technological Heaven

If creating a more just utopia is not sufficient motivation for transhumanists to engage current issues of social justice, I would point out that making virtual heaven more accessible and equitable would encourage more people to embrace transhumanist technologies. Not all Christians are homophobic, but promoting this message—and communicating it to the proponents of IVR and transhumanism—has been and continues to be a constant struggle. So many Christian groups continue to be burdened with prejudiced dogma and misinterpreted Biblical passages that the message of love, acceptance, and welcome many Christians promote becomes lost in the hateful rhetoric that has accumulated throughout history. On the other hand, transhumanism is a relatively young (religious?) movement and science fiction that depicts IVR is a rapidly developing area of creation. So far, the type of dogma that is associated with Christianity has not tarnished the image of sci-fi IVR, but as these medias evolve, the stories that are told *about* them *are* going to influence the reception of developing IVR technologies. So the question is: what image of sci-fi IVR will evolve over time? Will it be one of welcoming and acceptance, as LGBT individuals could expect to receive when passing over or logging into a IVR platform? Or will the new criteria created by sci-fi creators and transhumanists lock out or ignore low-socio-economic status individuals, people with mental disabilities, and racial minorities?

Historically, no human technology has managed to create “heaven on earth”. Not the plow, not the gun, not even the internet. When depicting IVR as the technology most closely akin to a heavenly realm, authors, directors, and transhumanists need to take a step back from unquestioning enthusiasm. Yes, IVR is *super cool* in theory. It’s when we assume that IVR will be *equally cool* in practice that we consciously or unconsciously ignore factors like inequity,

prejudice, and greed that have prevented our *current* society with all its *current* technology from becoming a heavenly realm. The current generation of Christians will have to engage a long, uphill battle to make Christianity seem warm and welcoming to many LGBT people, but it's not too late for transhumanists and IVR enthusiasts to avoid the struggle associated with remedying preexisting injustices. Transhumanists must acknowledge and take responsibility for the injustices that may be perpetuated in the virtual worlds and temper the unbridled enthusiasm for the newest technology with a grounded understanding of the world we live in today. Program me an immersive virtual reality that can be engaged fully by people of all genders and sexual orientations, all socio-economic statuses, all levels of ability, and all races. *That* is the one I'll call heavenly.

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