Cloud 9

N. Matthias Moore
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Cloud 9 is a near future thriller about escapism, government control, and maintaining one's humanity.

In N. Matthias Moore's cyber thriller *Cloud 9*, gamers compete to reach a digital heaven first as outside forces conspire to bring the whole system crumbling down.

Michael has much going against him, including undiagnosed mental illness, a strained relationship with his girlfriend, and his broken family. He finds solace in VR gaming and climbs the leaderboards to become a living legend.

Michael's meteoric rise draws the attention of a shadowy organization. It offers an unlikely reward to those who complete a gaming challenge: access to a digital paradise in which the winner is granted full control. But unlike the games that Michael has mastered, the challenge inflicts real pain and carries the possibility of dying in reality—unless the gamer can beat nine levels before using up their three lives. While Michael fights for his life in the game, an attack against the organization threatens to disrupt and destroy the system.

In this pre-apocalyptic setting, people have already survived the Historic Fall. Unrest and social discord spread with the rise of spectator video game tournaments, which act as a salve for the tumultuous times. Parallels to our world are apparent, though *Cloud 9* includes more advanced technology. Some of that technology, including the VR gaming and the shadowy game, is underexplained, though.

Michael doesn't change much in the text; his major motivation is to survive the game. Characterizations take a backseat to the technology, including of Michael's brother, Charles, who plays a pivotal role in the novel's climax, but who isn't developed beyond his family connection. A snippet of code gains quasisentience and stands out in the text; its development is robust, and its empathetic connection to Michael injects humanity into the book.

The book does the bare minimum when it comes to world building outside of the game; scenes in the real world are shadowy, and conversations are one tone, despite the potential for differentiating the AI voice Michael interacts with the most from others. Conversely, there's an unusual focus on details—weapon descriptions, intricate architecture, and unusual NPC appearances—within the virtual world; the game comes to feel more realistic. Scenes set within the virtual world focus on characters' movements and dialogues, and are rife with snark and one-liners that help to maintain a fast flow.

The story introduces the concept of reaching the ninth level of the secretive game and shifts the narrative focus onto the mystery of a digital heaven. Michael's journey through the game is balanced by the attack on the outside before the twin threads combine for a compelling, apt resolution.

Cloud 9 is a near future thriller about escapism and government control, with a focus on maintaining humanity in the face of unrelenting want.

JOHN M. MURRAY (May 11, 2020)