

## Final Video Game

### Craig Speakes

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*A virtual reality game causes widespread mayhem in Final Video Game, an exciting science fiction novel with a lonely young hero at its center.*

In order to save the world from an AI takeover, a teenager equipped with a VR headset becomes a hero in Craig Speakes's novel *Final Video Game*.

Oli is thirteen years old. He lives with his mother; his father went missing a year prior. New to his school, Oli is eager to fit in. He has one good friend, Logan.

But Oli's everyday concerns are overshadowed by a strange phenomenon: hundreds of thousands of young people fall into mysterious comas after playing a virtual game; they are trapped in their VR headsets. The villain behind the phenomenon is AI-generated Razer. Oli and Logan are among the teenagers who are enlisted by the government to stop Razer's plans; they are sent to a secret location, where they meet Sparky, a member of their support crew. Oli and the other young gamers have to beat Razer's game, even as every move they make is watched by him.

Razer is a formidable foe whose extravagant entrance onto the world's screens confounds political leaders everywhere. Maddening and irreverent, his evolution is constant. As a villain, he is equal parts unpredictable and unsettling. This leads to entertaining turns in the story, which juxtaposes the seriousness of the situation with Oli's more ordinary teenage worries over making friends—and over his relationships with girls.

The book's characterizations are as distinctive as they are down-to-earth. The children make mistakes; they also cope with the consequences of their errors and try to learn from them. Sparky, for example, is sarcastic, snarky, intelligent, and proud; she and Oli form an immediate bond, and their trust in each other proves invaluable. Oli himself is funny if self-deprecating; his thoughtfulness and concern toward his loved ones are his most prominent virtues.

The book's action scenes are dynamic and tension filled. Each new trick and trap that Razer releases into the game, often on chaotic whims, results in added urgency; these challenges also help the young players reveal themselves in all their humanity. As a result, the shocks are continual and the audience's engagement is constant. Still, though the story catapults from obstacle to obstacle well, its momentum is somewhat diluted by instances of necessary exposition.

An unexpected hero takes the stage in *Final Video Game*, a humorous science fiction adventure in which beleaguered young gamers face a frightening new enemy.

NATALIE WOLLENZIEN (March 5, 2024)

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