

Quarantine Treasures in Pandora

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Pandora—not the “all-gifted” first female created in Greek mythology. Nor her infamous box (or jar) that once opened then released evil into humanity. Nor the massive music-streaming service est. in 2000, which in 2014 claimed 70 percent of the internet radio market with 76 million monthly users.

I recommend James Cameron’s 2009 blockbuster “Avatar” for a journey by proxy to the artfully imagined world of Pandora. In the movie, Pandora is a planet-moon near Alpha Centauri, the closest star system to our sun at 4.37 lightyears away.

If you Google “Avatar movie,” notice several, even an Italian 1916 silent that was renamed “The Magician” in the U.K. A 2004 Chinese “Avatar” sets up a 2019 world where everyone is implanted with a microchip, which will tickle the conspiracy theorists today warning about a medical microchips (which I am not totally against). The 2010 “Avatar: The Last Airbender” is a spin-off from the animated series and considered one of the worst films ever made. None of these are worth any effort.

Yet, it is reported that Cameron wrote an 80-page draft in 1994 that he planned to pursue after his 1997 “Titanic.” But the technology was not yet available to make his vision come alive, and “alive” is the key term here. Work began in 2005 with a \$235 million budget that some estimate to have ballooned to \$310 million on production and \$150 million for promotion.

It hit the screen in Dec. of 2009 and became the highest-grossing film worldwide for a decade, until “Avengers: Endgame” came out in 2019. After inflation adjustments, “Avatar” remains the second highest grossing after “Gone with the Wind” with an estimated total of \$3 billion.

A young wheelchair-bound leatherneck—U.S. Marine—heads to Pandora to replace his more scientific brother in a quasi-military role that has a similar subplot with the 1989 “Star Trek: Insurrection,” wherein the Federation has a secret base studying the seemingly backward peaceful Ba’ku people. Between the two, “Insurrection” is about exposing a plot to secretly transfer the Ba’ku, while in “Avatar” the seemingly innocent peaceful Na’vi have to struggle against politically ambitious humans that threaten the ultimate destruction of Pandora from mining.

The word “avatar” in Hinduism is the incarnation of a deity in human or animal form, usually to counteract some evil in the world, a kind of incarnation that Christian apologists dismiss. There could be a trickle of the Hindu philosophy late in the movie, though nothing unusual in sci-fi adventures where physics are stretched or set aside. There is no religion, per se, presented, defended, or defrauded as the movie’s theme pushes moral conflicts that tease us throughout.

In the world of online gaming avatar is as common as a Ford or Chevrolet. The avatar might be as simple as a cartoon picture or unique symbol/icon that represents the player inside the game for others players see. In role-playing board or online games, the avatar can be a creature or human figure that the player manipulates from his recliner as his or her avatar inside the game grows in strength, skills, and powers as the avatar goes through increasingly complex levels of adventures.



The earliest use appears to be in the quasi-online game, Avatar, in 1979, over a decade before personal computers. It was created in the University of Illinois computer system and involved multiple players going through a dungeon.

The role-playing Dungeons and Dragons board game caused a stir in a few Christian communities in the 1980s with hints of sorcery for those who did not look closely.

The most creative role-playing games crowd the internet with artistically made computer worlds that just get more and more sophisticated. The virtual worlds take the savvy player from level to level, world to world, or kingdom to kingdom, and the multi-player worlds span the globe.

A Google search said there were an astounding 700 million online games with 1.2 billion players—about one sixth of earth's 7.8 billion. There are tournaments for the most popular, and one can make upward of \$100k a year if one is very, very good. The board games alone have been reported to have a \$1.5 billion market (NerdsonEarth.com). But that pales into the shadows compared to the massive online international industry which is harder to calculate. Two of the most popular online games today are CallofDuty.com and WorldofWarcraft.com, and their parent company, Activision Blizzard, boasted a 2019 third-quarter revenue of \$1.28 billion, which is about \$5 billion a year all by itself.

So the movie "Avatar" had the online and likewise massive sci-fi markets drooling. It hit several markets all at once with the military, fantasy, and adventure, too. The exquisite menagerie of colors blended superbly with a fine script and great actors in creating another realistic world of Pandora. The suspense rockets one into the human colonization of Pandora.

We earthlings are the more technologically advanced with a subtle plan to overtake all. The politics resemble how the U.S. assumed the lands of the American Indian, and perhaps that was one point. We are mining the rare fictitious mineral "unobtainium," a name that seems to illustrate a subtle point or two. Is "unobtainium" a metaphor for congressional pork dealing?

Humans cannot breathe the Pandoran air, so they wear Exo-Packs when they are outside of the climate-controlled quarantined buildings. We constructed large robotic shells that we climb into and control like a full-body prosthesis, maybe ten feet all.

This splendid movie made billions for a reason, and even if you saw it once or twice, I am sure you will see something new these days. In many respects, everyone on Pandora is somewhat quarantined, too. The peaceful Na'vi are not yet interstellar travelers, so they are confined to their beautiful homeland. We earthlings must wear complete oxygen suits to go outside. And there are other April 2020 similarities as scientists conflict with the soldiers, the soldiers resent the politicians, and the rather innocent Na'vi who reluctantly resist destruction.

I dare not assume all have seen it, so I must not go further on how the Marine inhabits his avatar and enters the world of the Na'vi. Of course, no secret, he is thrilled to be rid of his life-sentence of wheelchair quarantine, and his tall, lean Na'vi avatar can run like the wind ... and do much more.

There is something for everyone in this clean, creative, convoluting journey.

See more at Avatar.com, and notice that Avatar 2, 3, 4, and 5 are due out successively in Dec. of 2021, '23, '25, and '27. And if you go there, you too can join the PRF, the Pandoran Research Foundation.