

# DIGITAL HYPERREALITY AND POWER: AN ANALYSIS OF THE FILM FREE GUY IN THE CONTEXT OF BAUDRILLARD AND FOUCAULT

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the film *Free Guy* (2021) within the context of two important theorists of postmodern thought, Jean Baudrillard and Michel Foucault. The aim of the study is to reveal how the digital universe of Free City in the film can be interpreted within the framework of Baudrillard's concepts of simulation–simulacrum and hyperreality, as well as Foucault's concepts of power, biopolitics, discipline, panopticon, and subjectification. The film represents the form taken by modern society in the digital age, pointing to a new model of reality produced by code, surveillance, and algorithmic order. Guy's transformation from an algorithmic NPC to a conscious being finds its counterpart both in Baudrillard's discussion of simulacra and in Foucault's concept of subjectification within power relations. In this context, *Free Guy* is considered an important piece of popular culture that reveals the simulationist and disciplinary structure of today's digital culture.

**Keywords:** *Simulation, Simulacrum, Hyperreality, Panopticon, Surveillance, Power, Digital Culture, Free Guy.*

## Introduction

With the integration of digital technologies into the core of everyday life, the concepts of reality, knowledge and power have taken on new forms. Two of the thinkers who best explain this transformation are undoubtedly Jean Baudrillard and Michel Foucault. While Baudrillard argues that modern society is now governed by simulations and that hyperreality has replaced reality, Foucault emphasises that power shapes individuals not only through oppression but also through the production of knowledge, discipline and surveillance.

This theoretical framework provides a powerful analytical tool for understanding the digital world represented in the film *Free Guy*. Free City is both a hyper-real simulation universe and a disciplinary surveillance space constantly monitored by users and developers. Guy's gaining

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consciousness and becoming aware of his own existence in this universe is a critical intersection point where the two theories converge. This study aims to analyse the film from both a simulationist and a power-focused perspective, discussing the production logics, power relations, and understanding of reality in the digital world.

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Baudrillard: Simulation, Simulacra and Hyperreality Theory**

According to Baudrillard, in the modern world, simulation has ceased to be an imitation of reality; it has become a new order that replaces reality and operates according to its own internal logic. Baudrillard divides simulation into three categories: the imitation of reality, the reproduction of reality with the advent of mass production, and hyperreality, where the model rather than representation determines reality. Hyperreality signifies a state where the distinction between reality and simulation has completely vanished (1). Simulacra no longer exist in reference to an original; they are not a 'mask covering the absence of reality' but structures that replace reality itself (2).

In Baudrillard's Theory of Simulation, it is stated that in the modern world, simulation has now replaced reality and produces its own artificial realities, namely simulacra (3). In this context, just as one would react to a real event, similar behavioural patterns are repeated in simulated events. For example, when simulating an illness, the person does not merely claim to be ill. They mimic the symptoms specific to the illness to make the condition visible. This example demonstrates how simulation increasingly blurs the distinction between the real and the fake, imaginary or artificial (4).

Baudrillard describes the fundamental nature of simulation as a set of models that encompass even the most ordinary events and replace reality (4). He therefore emphasises that simulation often has a more effective and persuasive operation than reality (4). Simulacra, within this structure, become a level of appearance that replaces the real and refers only to itself. Thus, the connection between the original and its representation is completely severed (4).

#### **Foucault: Power, Surveillance and the Theory of Subjectivation**

Foucault argues that modern power operates not through coercion but through discipline, knowledge production and surveillance. The Panopticon metaphor demonstrates how this form of surveillance creates internalised controls in individuals, turning them into obedient subjects. Subjectivation, on the other hand, is a process in which power does not entirely determine the individual; rather, the individual constructs their own existence within power relations (5).

### **Research Methodology**

This study examines the film *Free Guy* (2021) within the context of two important theorists of postmodern thought, Jean Baudrillard and Michel Foucault. The aim of the study is to reveal how the digital universe of *Free City* in the film can be interpreted within the framework of

Baudrillard's concepts of simulation–simulacrum and hyperreality, as well as Foucault's concepts of power, biopolitics, discipline, panopticon, and subjectification. The film represents the form taken by modern society in the digital age, pointing to a new model of reality produced by code, surveillance, and algorithmic order. The film *Free Guy* (2021) has been examined using the descriptive analysis method. Descriptive analysis is the process of observing a work of art, film or text in detail and analysing it by defining it in detail. Adopting an objective approach, descriptive analysis systematically explains the auditory, visual, physical and content-related characteristics of the work. The process of classifying, summarising, and describing the fundamental characteristics of the data obtained regarding the subject of the study is carried out using this method (6). In this analysis process, the scenes and dialogues in the film were observed and evaluated in detail. During the research process, a literature review was conducted to establish the theoretical framework of the study and support the analysis of the film.

### **Analysis of the Film *Free Guy* in the Context of Baudrillard's Theory of Simulation, Simulacra and Hyperreality and Foucault's Theory of Power, Surveillance and Subjectivation**

#### **Production of Reality from the Model**

According to Baudrillard, in hyperreal spaces, reality is now produced directly through a model and no longer serves a purely imitative function (7). This situation is observed in various forms in the *Free City* universe. Death is temporary for NPCs, time progresses cyclically, the flow of events is determined by code, and the behaviour of characters is directed by algorithms. Therefore, the simulation has not only presented a reflection of reality but has created its own unique hyperreality by producing reality from the model.

#### **The Blurring of the Line Between Player and NPC**

According to Baudrillard, traditional boundaries and distinctions in modern societies are becoming increasingly blurred, and the differences between reality and representation, subject and object, are becoming obscured (4). This situation is clearly observable in the film *Free Guy*. As NPCs, particularly Guy, begin to exhibit human-like behaviours and emotional responses, players distance themselves from reality through their “virtual identities” within the simulation. Thus, the game universe functions as a space where the simulation eliminates the traditional boundaries between subject and object, revealing the typical characteristics of hyperreality.

#### **A Subject Within the Simulation**

Guy's process of becoming conscious does not signify the complete collapse of the simulacrum order. On the contrary, it represents the emergence of a new subject within the logic of the simulation itself. As Baudrillard emphasises, there is no longer any “original” reference in simulacra (1). In this context, Guy does not become conscious by referring to a

real human being, but rather produces a new form of consciousness through the simulation's own internal mechanisms. Therefore, Guy emerges as a typical subject of hyperreality. He cannot be defined as entirely human or entirely machine. His existence can only be evaluated as a 'subject as signifier'.

### **The Mechanism of Sovereignty in Simulation**

According to Baudrillard, modern power no longer operates through traditional means of oppression but through code and simulation (7). In the film *Free Guy*, Antwan has the authority to determine all the rules of reality in the Free City universe and uses his power to manipulate the game code to erase the existence of NPCs or change their behaviour. This situation can be interpreted as a cinematic counterpart to Baudrillard's view that 'code has replaced truth'. In the film, the source of authority lies in the flow of information and algorithmic control mechanisms rather than physical force. Therefore, sovereignty is being redefined through a digital simulation.

### **A Simulation Space Without Consequences**

One of the most striking aspects of Baudrillard's conception of simulation is the loss of actions' real-world counterparts. In other words, consequences disappear in the simulation environment (1). The Free City universe clearly reflects this situation. Violence inflicted upon NPCs has no lasting effect; death is merely a temporary interruption, and nothing lost is irretrievable. This structure reveals the pleasure-oriented nature of hyperreality. Violence ceases to be a real action and becomes a game mechanism that supports the functioning of the system.

### **The Quest for Truth and the Self-Revelation of Simulation**

Baudrillard argues that simulations cannot reveal their own operating logic because these structures exist by concealing the truth (7). However, the film allows the limits of simulation to be partially revealed and enables Guy to develop an awareness of these limits. Guy's curiosity about the world beyond his own creates a kind of fissure in the simulation order, calling into question the consistency of the existing system. While this somewhat distances the film from Baudrillard's pessimistic approach, it creates an important arena for discussion, enabling reflection on simulation's potential to produce truth or redefine it.

The Free City universe featured in the film is conceived as a hyper-real simulation space that functions independently and generates its own reality, while also serving as a copy or representation of the outside world. For this reason, *Free Guy* can be considered one of the contemporary examples that makes simulation theory visible in a cinematic form. Free City exists not as a simple imitation of the real world, but as an independent system of signs with its own rules, dynamics, and logic of operation. In that the simulation is not a 'mask covering the absence of reality' but a new order replacing reality, the film *Free City* is, in the fullest sense, a third-order simulacrum.

### **The Gaming World as a Panopticon**

In Foucault's concept of the panopticon, prisoners are constantly under surveillance, while the presence of the authority observing them is rendered invisible (8). Similarly, the Free City universe reflects this surveillance dynamic in a digital environment. The NPCs in the game, particularly Guy, are both constantly observed by players and have their behaviour directed in real time. Furthermore, game developers can monitor the actions of NPCs in real time. Violence, theft, and chaotic events have become routine in the game, and NPCs repeat these rules without question. This ensures that NPCs' lives are sustained within a disciplinary system determined by the game code. Thus, a structure emerges that parallels Foucault's understanding of discipline, which refers to the micro-level management of behaviour in modern societies.

### **The Productive Aspect of Power: Guy's Subjectivation**

Foucault's concept of subjectification does not refer to the individual's liberation by stepping outside of power, but rather to the development of one's own possibilities for action within the conditions created by power (9). Guy's process of gaining consciousness in the film *Free Guy* concretises this theoretical framework. In particular, Guy's encounter with Millie constitutes a turning point that could be described as Foucault's 'spark of subjectification.' From this critical moment onwards, Guy rejects the behavioural patterns dictated by the code, develops new and alternative actions, and reconstructs his own identity and sense of self. This transformation can be explained by the concept of 'self-technologies' (10), which Foucault defines as the techniques individuals employ to shape their own existence. Guy creates a new sphere of action within the framework of power relations by establishing a unique subject position for himself within the existing order, even if he does not completely exit the system.

### **Discourse, Knowledge and Truth Production**

Foucault's concept of the 'regime of truth' refers to the power's ability to determine what is considered true or valid in society (10). In the film *Free Guy*, the gaming company Soonami produces a dominant discourse on how Free City should be perceived. Antwan's constant emphasis on NPCs being unconscious reveals the company's attempt to unilaterally control the game's world of meaning. In contrast, Millie and Keys' questioning of this dominant discourse validates Foucault's principle that 'where there is power, there is resistance' (11). This resistance is not limited to physical actions but also occurs at the level of discourse and knowledge production. The acceptance that Guy has gained consciousness undermines the foundation of the regime of truth established by the company and symbolises the collapse of the existing discourse of power.

### **Digital Biopolitics: Governing Life Through Code**

Foucault's concept of biopolitics refers to the regulation and governance of individuals' and societies' life processes by power (12). In the film *Free Guy*, this concept is embodied in a digital environment. The lifespans, behavioural patterns, and exposure to risks of NPCs are entirely determined by the game code. The Soonami company shapes the digital lives of NPCs by controlling the conditions of their existence. The deletion of the code directly equates to the 'death' of NPCs. This situation can be considered a digital reflection of biopolitics. In the film, Guy and the other NPCs' struggle for survival can be interpreted as a biopolitical resistance. In particular, Antwan's decision to delete the NPCs as part of a system update demonstrates that biopolitics has the capacity not only to regulate life but also to destroy it. This is consistent with Foucault's view that biopolitics has both a productive and a destructive function.

### **The Relationship Between Power and Pleasure and Player Behaviour**

Foucault emphasises that power relations operate not only through prohibitive and coercive mechanisms but also through the production of pleasure. In the *Free City* universe, players deriving pleasure from violence towards NPCs demonstrates that the system establishes a power structure that is both productive and directive. Guy's refusal to accept this cycle and his questioning of his behaviour can be explained by Foucault's concept of ethical subjectification. The individual creates a new ethical position for themselves by re-evaluating their actions and redefines their role within the system.

When viewed from this theoretical perspective, the film *Free Guy* clearly reveals that the game universe functions as a digital panopticon. The fact that all NPCs' (Non-Player Characters) actions are traceable, the developers' uninterrupted control over the game space, and the position of company manager Antwan, who oversees this world from above, can be read as a digital-age counterpart to Foucault's approach defining the relationship between power and surveillance. In the film, the artificial intelligence-based NPC Guy gains consciousness and challenges the norms imposed by the system, which aligns with Foucault's view that the subject is both an entity shaped by power and an agent capable of resisting that same power.

### **Conclusion**

*Free Guy* offers a rich field of analysis in terms of both simulation and power theories. Baudrillard's simulation theory explains the structure of the film's digital universe, while Foucault's understanding of power-surveillance reveals how this universe operates.

*Free Guy* renders Baudrillard's simulation theory visible on the cinematic plane. The film presents the viewer with a world where models have replaced reality, the subject is produced through code and algorithms, violence is transformed into a futile, repeatable action, authority operates through digital control mechanisms rather than physical force, and hyperreality shapes everyday experience. In these respects, *Free Guy* serves as a rich cultural text that

reopens the debate on Baudrillard's postmodern societal analyses within the context of the digital age.

Free Guy offers a rich field of analysis within the framework of Foucault's concepts of power, surveillance, subjectification, and biopolitics. The film constructs the digital universe as a modern panoptic mechanism, demonstrating how power produces truth through discursive and technological tools, emphasising that subjectification is possible within power relations, and revealing that even digital life can be part of biopolitics. Guy's subjectification and resistance embody Foucault's idea that power is never unidirectional and that opposing forces exist in every relationship, expressed through cinematic language.

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