



FREE GUY: A FILM PORTRAIT OF A DIGITAL-GAMING PRESENCE

LEVY, S. (Director): *Free Guy*. [DVD]. Los Angeles, CA : 20th Century Studios, 2021.

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The most interesting thing about those really good Hollywood blockbusters is how they enter into the collective memory and free themselves, breaking out of their transience. Movies become classics not because they make a lot of money in cinemas during their premiere, but because viewers accept them as their own and like to return to them even years later. After decades, when they look old, even seem archaic, in very close connection with how quickly and dramatically film language changes, their viewers do not mind, because what enters the collective memory is not the visuality of such movies, but the story carried by that visuality.

The stories do not age, nor do the thoughts contained in them, even though they may not surprise us anymore, the form ages and it matters much less, although it may be that first attraction. *Free Guy*, this year's surprising summer movie hit produced by one of the biggest contemporary Hollywood giants, Disney, will set an example. Not today, nor tomorrow, but ten, fifteen, twenty years later, when we return to it as a movie that very accurately and sophisticatedly illustrates the relationship between the two currently strongest pop-culture fields – cinematography and digital games, whereas it does not have to be necessarily about their internal relations and contexts, but about the external.

However, in the end, as we like to return to movies that have not aged other than formally, we return to digital games. It is not about nostalgia or retro, but about essence, about the experience of playing, about the notorious gameplay that separates the wheat from the chaff. What *Free Guy* offers at first look is a seemingly very simple to conventional, and at its core, romantic story, set in the visually attractive environment of a fictional digital-gaming sandbox. Such *GTA*¹ online combined with *Fortnite*², called *Free City*, represents an open online digital-gaming world. At its core, it is an action piece with MMORPG elements, a straightforward, fun game whose basic attraction model is the absence of a moral imperative. The world, which is attractive because in it, *don't kill* does not apply. If the viewer has not been acquainted with the plot in advance via the reception code widely distributed through the PR campaign, they will understand the basic mechanism relatively soon, but differently, as usual. The main character is not the viewer-player, but the viewer-viewer personified in a non-playable character. The main character is the NPC, not the player who enters the game from the outside, but the game itself represented by just one of its non-playable characters. Here begins the relatively conventional story of awakening, of taking responsibility, or rather that although circumstances may be convincing us of something else, we are all the main characters of our own lives.

1 ROCKSTAR NORTH et al.: *Grand Theft Auto (series)*. [digital game]. New York : Rockstar Games, 1997-2021.

2 EPIC GAMES: *Fortnite Battle Royale*. [digital game]. Cary, NC : Epic Games, 2017.

Somewhere here, in a story that bears all the obvious external features of simple straightforward cinematic entertainment, starts to appear the undercurrent, the second and the third layers, those in which both the relationship between the creator and the created and the process of self-awareness as the process of continuous emergence of self-learning artificial intelligence are thematised. The conventional clichés associated with the operation of the digital-gaming industry are thematised a bit banally, when independent game developers represent some imaginary good, and a multinational digital-gaming corporation, a large company that concerns nothing but profit, represents evil. And of course, in addition, there is also a motive of love and its creative power – that fairy-tale kiss that awakens life.

Free Guy is simply a multi-layered film, but its highest quality remains the internal order and clarity with which the creators managed to maintain the original genre definition. Despite all its sophistication, it still remains an action romantic comedy. So, we have a film that can entertain in at least two ways – the simple one, in which catharsis is conditioned only by enjoying the action sequences and keeping our fingers crossed for the protagonist as he experiences his adventure, and the more complicated one in which we feel catharsis and satisfaction because we think about what we see. And we can go really deep, to places where the interpretation smoothly passes to overinterpretation, meaning to places where every viewer has to deal with the film for themselves and all (over)interpretations are correct. Free Guy thus portrays the digital game world not only from the outside, but also from the inside, because it simulates the ways in which we play games, or how we approach them.

What can be considered as the most important is the dimension of the film, in which Free Guy becomes a generational bridge and a unique statement of the first generation of gamers – today's players and creators of pop culture content, who quite naturally sophisticate their life experience. Film director, Shawn Levy, and his screenwriters, Matt Lieberman and Zak Penn, are plus or minus their fifties, successful Hollywood filmmakers who already have something behind them and do not have to prove anything to anyone. Maybe only to themselves. Free Guy is just such a balance, and its leitmotif is that they have already grown with digital games and, in fact, thanks to them, they did not have to grow up quite well. In their case, digital games are even an element of personal constitution, they have become who they are thanks to digital games – or because the games in their case are no longer a life phase which gets overcome by growing up, but also remain a continuous part of their lives today. Free Guy is a psychoanalytic portrait of that experience.

The film, which can serve as a popularizing example *pari pro toto* in interpreting several current theoretical concepts, from the causally intertwined relationship between *simulacra* and *simulation*,³ as considered by Jean Baudrillard, through the metaphor of pop culture as a perfectly user-friendly housing estate, in which its inhabitants will, nevertheless, tread their own paths, used by John Fiske to think about how to understand it (popular culture)⁴ up to Henry Jenkins' concept of '*poaching*' *participatory culture*.⁵ Of course, it cannot be said that the screenwriters of Free Guy know these theories and consciously work with them, rather in a different form – an artwork, thematising the same and similar things as Baudrillard, Fiske, and Jenkins in their theories. There could be also more of those big, resonant names, Slavoj Žižek, Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin, even Umberto Eco, however, in their case it applies as well that in relation to the film Free Guy, they can actually represent its parallel, theoretical knowledge.

3 For more information, see: BAUDRILLARD, J.: *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor, MI : University of Michigan Press, 1994.

4 See also: FISKE, J.: *Jak rozumět populární kulturu*. Prague : Akropolis, 2017.

5 For example, see: JENKINS, H.: *Pytláci textů*. Prague : Akropolis, 2019.

In general, there are various theoretical keys through which to analyse and interpret this film. Particularly, it is so because we can say about the director, screenwriter, and producer Zak Penn, based on his previous work (*Ready Player One*⁶, *Atari: Game Over*⁷), that he has got practical pop culture experience and therefore naturally understands it at least as well as the mentioned 'big names'. Zak Penn is a professional geek at first and then everything else, and *Free Guy* illustrates this extremely convincingly. Like a big Hollywood spectacle, a film – an attraction, not to freely forget about it, but mainly as a movie based on a perfect, internally absolutely coherent screenplay, in which no motif is just hanging in the air, and everything has its own meaning and significance.

In conclusion, *Free Guy* is an extraordinarily convincing and multi-layered portrait of pop culture, a film about which it would not be a problem to either lecture or write theoretical books. Basically, all you have to do is watch it and think about it. The theory is always secondary.

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6 SPIELBERG, S. (Director): *Ready Player One*. [DVD]. Burbank, CA : Warner Bros. Pictures, 2018.

7 PENN, Z. (Director): *Atari: Game Over*. [DVD]. Redmond, WA : Microsoft, 2014.