



**JOURNAL OF INFORMATION  
SYSTEM AND TECHNOLOGY  
MANAGEMENT  
(JISTM)**  
[www.jistm.com](http://www.jistm.com)



## VISUAL PRESENTATION OF CYBERSPACE: ANALYZING THE PRODUCTION DESIGN OF THE FILM, FREE GUY

Liu Guangquan<sup>1</sup>, Azhari Md Hashim<sup>2</sup>, Norman Yusoff<sup>3</sup>

- <sup>1</sup> Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM)  
Email: 67939247@qq.com  
<sup>2</sup> Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM)  
Email: azhari033@uitm.edu.my  
<sup>3</sup> Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM)  
Email: normyus02@gmail.com  
\* Corresponding Author

### Article Info:

#### Article history:

Received date: 13.10.2022  
Revised date: 20.11.2022  
Accepted date: 15.12.2022  
Published date: 31.12.2022

#### To cite this document:

Liu, G., Md Hashim, A., & Yusoff, N. (2022). Visual Presentation of Cyberspace: Analyzing the Production Design of the Film, Free Guy. *Journal of Information System and Technology Management*, 7 (29), 136-143.

DOI: 10.35631/JISTM.729012

This work is licensed under [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)



### Abstract:

Cyberspace is a virtual world in a computer network. With the continuous development of information technology and the continuous expansion of the boundary of art, more and more artists and designers focus their exploration on the visual presentation of cyberspace. Video games and sci-fi movies have become the testing ground for the visual image of cyberspace. The film Free Guy is a science fiction film based on video games. The film production designers designed a fantasy and colourful cyberspace for Free Guy, which has been widely praised for its visual presentation. Therefore, this study mainly analyzes the visual representation of cyberspace from the production design of the film Free Guy.

### Keywords:

Cyberspace, Production Design, Visual Presentation, Virtual Reality

## Introduction

The 2021 film *Free Guy* features virtual characters from video games. It uses cyberspace as its main narrative setting, telling the story of adventurers teaming up to save the virtual game world. The success of the film *Free Guy* in the visual presentation of cyberspace is mainly attributed to the visual design of the film - the work of the production designers. Production

design mainly includes set design, character design, and related image design in the film. Therefore, this study attempts to analyze the production design in the film *Free Guy* (2021) from the above aspects, study the visual presentation of cyberspace, and summarize the relevant design methods.

### Immersive Visual Experiences: FUI Design

Guy, the leading character in the movie *Free Guy*, is an NPC (non-player character) in the world of video games. In order to better visualize the character, production designer Ethan said he read a lot of review articles and visited gaming forums before designing, played with game bugs, and watched non-players in games like *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013) and *Red Dead Redemption* (2016), trying to draw inspiration from the video game.

One of the highlights of the film's visual design is the FUI design that appears when the main character, Guy, wears glasses. FUI stands for fictional-user-interfaces or fantasy-user-interfaces. Its use in movies is not for "operational experience" but for visual effects [4]. From this point of view, FUI can be regarded as a kind of art decoration. When Guy puts on his glasses, the screen changes from a third view to a first-person subjective view of the video game interface (Figure 1.1). The abstract geometric neon effect covers the outline of buildings and landscapes, and trademarks and graphics are suspended in the air three-dimensionally. All moving characters and vehicles are marked with a numerical cursor, Guy can sense and touch game items, and the everyday street scene is transformed into a video game experience. This cool, immersive experience is similar to the design pattern for *Grand Theft Auto V*.



Figure 1.1 The FUI Design of Guy

Meanwhile, the subjective shot of Guy wearing glasses in *Free Guy* is reminiscent of the subjective view of Murphy in *Robocop* (1987) when he becomes a robotic Cyborg. The subjective images of the gaze of both are based on the images of the real scene by adding some kind of digital error visual effects. In his book *Cyberpunk Visual Culture* (2018), Christopher McGunnigle argues that "Murphy's subjective shot to reinforce electronic messages is not simply picture-in-picture, but a kind of 'identity distortion'" [7]. The same is true of the subjective perspective in *Free Guy*-- the gaze on the media landscape from Guy's subjective view is not only to enrich the visual effects of the picture or enhance the immersive experience but also to emphasize the transformation of Guy's identity from a non-player character to an artificial intelligence with autonomous consciousness. This shift makes Guy an out-of-control player.

In addition to Guy's subjective shot, the FUI design has also been used by production designers in scenarios similar to video game design, where players look at each other's level information. In cyberspace, when Guy and Millie exchange combat experience, the character's level information is also shown on top of the character through FUI. When Guy touched the digital interface with his hand, the text in the interface fluctuated. This interactive design also gives the viewer the immersive feel of a real game experience.

### **The Visual Boundary between Cyberspace and the Real World**

The difficulty in the production design of cyberspace in the movie *Free Guy* is to visually distinguish the boundary between cyberspace and the real world. Since the leading character, Guy, is an NPC in the video game world, the cyber world is real in his eyes. And this reality is a virtual reality that is different from the real world. Therefore, it is very important to distinguish between cyberspace and real space in set design.

### **Visual Contrast of the Main Set Design**

The main setting of cyberspace is outdoors -- the streets of Free City (Figure 2.1), and the streets of Free City look clean, tidy, bright, and full of life and hope. The production designers used a lot of geometric shapes and highly saturated colours. Buildings have more regularity and symmetry in their layout, and the depth of field in cyberspace will be greater than in reality. The streets of the video game in the virtual world are more like Boston's block layout -- visually a mix of brutalist and federalist architecture. It is not only the architectural style that is mixed but also the cultural elements of the scene, such as the garbage cans and vending machines in the streets of Japan, the taxis in India, and the neon intersection design in Europe, all blended in the same scene by designers, which visually emphasizes the unreality of the cyber world.

In the real world, the main setting is indoors -- Soonami Technologies (Figure 2.1), a company whose name seems to have something to do with the Japanese game company Konami. Soonami Company is composed of open office space, the office area design is relatively dense, the desk decoration is also messy, the overall picture is blue-grey tone, the scene colour saturation is very low, and the environment outside the building is rainy and dark weather. Extensive glass walls accentuate the company's technological feel, at the same time, the natural lighting in the environment was deliberately weakened by designers, and the artificial lighting on the roof was enhanced instead. Obviously, these designs are in contrast to the vibrant, bright, and clean streets of Free City in cyberspace.



**Figure 2.1 Left is the streets of Free City, right is Soonami Technologies**

### **Visual Contrast of the Residence Set Design**

Production designers tried to emphasize a sense of unreality in the cyberspace dwelling of the movie Free City -- the main character Guy's dwelling (Figure 2.2) visually resembles a 3D modelling scene with unfinished textures. The bedroom and living room are independent of each other, and the space is clearly divided -- which makes the viewers feel that Guy's activities



are restricted. The walls and furniture are all white, without any decoration, and it looks very clean, bright, and spotless. The books on the desk are unnumbered and unwritten, and the calendar on the wall is missing one day a week. The closets were regular squares and not chamfered, the only items in the closet were khaki chinos, and blue shirts, the only items in the refrigerator were milk, and the only utensils were spoons and cereal bowls. All the furniture and cabinets are of no discernible material as if they were a base model in 3D software. These dehumanized, lifeless interior scenes are designed to suggest that this is a cold, exclusive virtual space for the non-player character.



**Figure 2.2 The Set Design of the Guy's Residence**

In the real space, the set design of the heroine Millie's residence (Figure 2.3) is relatively random, which makes the viewers feel the real texture of life. Spaces such as bedrooms and studies are not clearly divided, and bicycles and hangers are randomly placed in the space. There are many small, scattered light sources (table lamps, wall lamps) in the house, and the colour is mainly dim and warm. The table is disorganized with many objects, the refrigerator and the walls are plastered with pop culture posters, and the cabinets are cluttered with a variety of cutlery -- the set design is very life-like. At the same time, the production designers sought to highlight the richness of the materials: leather chairs, wooden cabinets, cloth sofas, and the texture of plants -- all of which contrast with the drab materials found in the interior set design of the cyber world.



**Figure 2.3 The Set Design of Millie's Residence**

### **The Connection Between The Set And The Character In Cyberspace: Visual Design Of Storage**

In the cyberspace setting of the movie *Free City*, each virtual game character has a personal storage vault to store all kinds of weapons, vehicles, and personal items in the video game. Since these individual repositories can be designed freely by the game player, the film production designers try to represent the personalities of different characters through the storage rooms of different visual styles.

#### ***The Design of Guy's Storage***

In the storage room of the hero, Guy has a certain sense of age and interest in the design and collocation of colours and materials (Figure 3.1). The combination of dim lighting, traditional

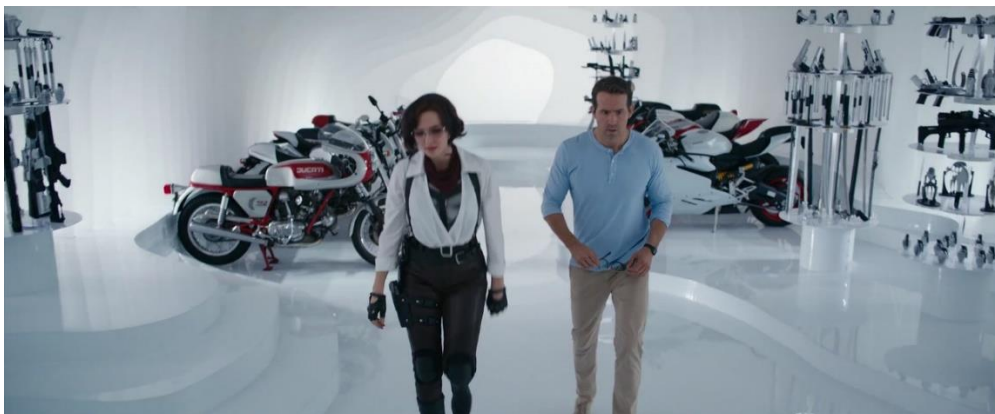
brown wood floors, and green lights projected on the walls has a slow-paced, old-school American bar feel. At the same time, the collections vary from sports cars to catapults, space capsules to black horses, and off-road vehicles painted pink. These visual contrasts and mash-ups create a comedic style that makes Guy witty and lighthearted.



**Figure 3.1 The Design of Guy's Storage**

### *The Design of Millie's Storage*

Millie's storage is made of curving white, and the interior is dominated by a clean, pure white palette punctuated by white ribbon-like light boxes (Figure 3.2). The storage room is small, with motorcycles and light-looking weapons on display, reflecting Millie's image as a capable and stylish female spy. The storage room is visually black, white, and red: white is the largest proportion, and the walls and floors are white; There is a small proportion of black: motorcycle tires, seat cushions, and weapons are all black; The proportion of red is the least, playing a decorative role: some motorcycles have red patterns. This combination of colours and proportions echoes Millie's colour design -- her trousers are black, her shirt is white, and her scarf and a little of her hair are dark red.



**Figure 3.2 The Design of Millie's Storage**

### *The Design of Antwan's Storage*

The size of the villain Antwan's storage is enormous. It was designed as a grandiose showroom (Figure 3.3). The showroom houses sports cars, rocket launchers, helicopters, and tanks. The showroom's walls are collaged with high-purity gold and low-purity blue, the reflective material floor strengthens the size and depth of the space, and the suspended giant spiral

staircase strengthens the sense of technology of the scene. These designs show that the villain Antwan is rich, extravagant, willful, and has strong control over cyberspace.



**Figure 3.3 The Design of Autwan's Storage**

### **Character Design in Cyberspace: from NPC to AI to Real Person**

#### ***Guy Character Design***

Guy, as the NPC (non-player character) role in the game, plays the function of serving players. Guy's appearance features are designed into three stages in the film: the first stage emphasizes the orderly ordinary NPC shape; the second stage is the uncontrolled NPC image with the gradual awakening of self-consciousness; the third stage is the real hero image who saves the video game world (Figure 4.1).

In the first stage, Guy is designed as an NPC under the control of the game order: he wears a light blue short-sleeved shirt, khaki tight trousers, and khaki leather shoes. He has a blue and khaki striped tie around the neck and a name tag on his chest. Guy's dress has a high degree of formality, and the shirt itself is a more formal clothing style in men's wear. The shirt is very fit and flat, with no excess wrinkles, and the shirt hem is tucked into the waistband. The designer chose the buckled collar invented by the Booker Brothers, the tie with the tie clip, and the design of the nameplate on the chest, which all added formality and order to the outfit. At the same time, the designer adopted a light blue and khaki colour scheme, which is less contrasting. The light blue shirt can better show the server's identity (NPC serving the player) than the ordinary white shirt [6].

The second stage of Guy's look, a light blue collarless knit long-sleeved T-shirt, followed as he gradually became more self-conscious. This long-sleeved T-shirt has the style of a Polo shirt, but with the collar and buttons removed, it reduces the formality and order of the outfit and adds a sporty and casual feel. At the same time, the close-fitting knit fabric can accentuate the men's strong figure, highlighting the strength of the fight. These designs reflect the fact that Guy is no longer an ordinary NPC controlled by the game's order but an uncontrolled player - or an awakened artificial intelligence.

Guy's appearance in the third stage was designed as a world-saving hero: the designer changed into his signature light blue shirt but wore it without a tie or name tag. The shirt's collar was open and folded freely, and the hem of the shirt was not tucked into the waistband. This light



blue shirt is worn in various ways to become more everyday and life oriented, indicating that Guy has changed from an out-of-control gamer to a real person (or real player).



**Figure 4.1 Left is GUY's First Stage Image, The Middle is GUY's Second Stage Image, and The Right is GUY's Third Stage Image**

### Millie Character Design

Millie in cyberspace is a nimble, skilled woman killer. She was wearing a white shirt, buttoned open to reveal tights made of reflective material. Over the shirt is a Y-shaped double buckle belt. Millie, meanwhile, wears brown leather leggings, black metal loop boots, and a rivet gun on her thigh (Figure 4.2). The designers enhanced the character's fashion sense with leather gloves, a dark red scarf, short dark red hair with highlights, and dark red sunglasses [5]. Tights, leather pants, suspenders, boots, and a pistol on the leg are all very typical elements of the female killer image -- the female killer in films such as *Resident Evil* (2002) and *Tomb Raid* (2001), which are adapted from video games, have similar images. Female killers in video games and movies often show their sexy side through close-fitting clothes, bare limbs, waist, and other parts. However, Millie wears a white shirt over her tights and a scarf over her chest, which makes her look conservative.

In the real world, Millie is a slovenly, internet-addicted, housebound woman. The designer created Millie's image of a woman who never goes out for a long time by wearing worn T-shirts, loose sweaters, unkempt hair, and a bare-faced face (Figure 4.2). This relatively life-like figure also contrasts with the capable image in the virtual game world, helping the viewers to understand the transformation from cyberspace to the real world.



**Figure 4.2**Left is Millie in Cyberspace. Right is Millie in The Real World

### Conclusions

In general, the visual design of cyberspace in the movie *Free Guy* does not blindly imitate the visual Settings of video games, nor does it simply present the game scene and characters in images. Instead, it expresses the transformation of characters' identities through the visual contrast between cyberspace and the real world. Unlike the grand, dystopian, realistic critical cyberspace designs of *The Matrix* (1999) and *Ready Player One* (2018), the production designers handled the cyberspace design of *Free Guy* with a lighter, funnier, and cooler approach. To some extent, it breaks through the antagonistic relationship between virtual and reality in traditional cyberspace space and presents a new concept of cyberspace space design.

### References

- "Free Guy": Why Millie And Keys Are The Heart Of The Movie". Collider, 2022, <https://collider.com/free-guy-keys-millie-relationship/>. Accessed 24 Nov 2022.
- Graham J. Murphy, Lars Schmeink, *Cyberpunk and Visual Culture*, Routledge, United Kingdom, 2018, pp.120.
- "How Visual Effects Shaped Free Guy's GTA-Inspired World | Digital Trends". Digital Trends, 2022, <https://www.digitaltrends.com/movies/free-guy-visual-effects-interview-vfx/>. Accessed 24 Nov 2022.
- Liu, Tao. "Research on FUI Style Design of Big Data Information Visualization." *E3S Web of Conferences*. Vol. 236. EDP Sciences, 2021.
- Murphy, Graham J., and Lars Schmeink, eds. *Cyberpunk and visual culture*. New York: Routledge, 2018.
- Peg McClellan (2020), *Production Design: Visual Design for Film and Television*, Routledge, United Kingdom.pp.5-6.
- Zhou Chengren, *Introduction to Film Production Design*, China Film Press, China, 1997, pp.5.