

Free Guy

Free Guy is a 2021 American action comedy film directed and produced by Shawn Levy from a screenplay by Matt Lieberman and Zak Penn, and a story by Lieberman. The film stars Ryan Reynolds, Jodie Comer, Lil Rel Howery, Utkarsh Ambudkar, Joe Keery, and Taika Waititi. It tells the story of a bank teller who discovers that he is a non-player character in a massively multiplayer online game who then partners with a player to find evidence that a gaming company's CEO stole the player's game's source code.

Lieberman began writing the script in 2016, which was acquired by 20th Century Fox shortly after. Levy passed on the script, but reconsidered after Hugh Jackman introduced him to Reynolds, resulting in him leaving the film adaptation of the *Uncharted* video game he had been developing. The acquisition of 21st Century Fox by Disney made *Free Guy* one of the first films produced by 20th Century to continue its production under Disney's ownership. Filming took place in Massachusetts and California between May and July 2019.

After the film was delayed two times by the COVID-19 pandemic, it premiered at the 74th Locarno Film Festival on August 10, 2021, and was released theatrically in the United States three days later on August 13 in RealD 3D, IMAX, 4DX and Dolby Cinema formats by 20th Century Studios. It grossed \$331.5 million worldwide. The film received generally positive reviews from critics for the concept, comparing it to science fiction films and action video games such as *Ready Player One*, *The Truman Show*, *The Matrix*, *Grand Theft Auto*, *The Lego Movie*, and *Fortnite*.^{[6][7]} The film received a nomination for Best Visual Effects at the 94th Academy Awards.

Plot

Free City is a massively multiplayer online game (MMO)^[8] developed by Soonami Studios. The players of *Free City* are distinguished from the non-player characters (NPCs) by the sunglasses they wear, and usually spend their time fighting each other and causing mayhem. Unaware that the world they live in is a video game, the NPCs are mostly oblivious to the chaos caused by the players while living out their scripted lives, including Guy, who works as a bank teller at Free City's bank with his best friend

Free Guy



Theatrical release poster

Directed by	<u>Shawn Levy</u>
Screenplay by	<u>Matt Lieberman</u> <u>Zak Penn</u>
Story by	<u>Matt Lieberman</u>
Produced by	<u>Ryan Reynolds</u> <u>Shawn Levy</u> <u>Sarah Schechter</u> <u>Greg Berlanti</u> <u>Adam Kolbrenner</u>
Starring	<u>Ryan Reynolds</u> <u>Jodie Comer</u> <u>Lil Rel Howery</u> <u>Utkarsh Ambudkar</u> <u>Joe Keery</u> <u>Taika Waititi</u>
Cinematography	<u>George Richmond</u>

Buddy, a security guard. Unemployed software developer Millie Rusk is playing *Free City* to find proof for a copyright infringement lawsuit that Soonami stole the source code from the concept game she developed, *Life Itself*, which included novel artificial intelligence techniques for its NPCs. Her friend Walter "Keys" McKey is sympathetic, but reluctant to help, as he now works in technical support at Soonami.

After Millie's avatar "MolotovGirl" catches Guy's attention by singing his favorite song, "Fantasy", he begins to deviate from his programming, shocking Buddy by accidentally shooting a skull-masked player robbing the bank and leaving with his sunglasses. Believing Guy to be a hacker disguised as an NPC, Keys and his coworker Mouser unsuccessfully try to ban him from the game. Accessing the players' view of the game, Guy visits new areas and meets Millie at Revenjamin Buttons' stash house, where they attempt to steal evidence leading to her source code. Believing Guy to be a novice player, she advises him to level up before trying again. Guy rapidly progresses through the game by completing missions benevolently, standing out from other players and becoming a worldwide sensation known as "Blue Shirt Guy" while Soonami's CEO Antwan Hovachelik has the artists "roid up" his design for the sequel *Free City 2*.

As Keys eventually realizes that Guy truly is an NPC, other NPCs that Guy interacts with also begin to develop self-awareness. Keys learns that *Free City 2* is due to release in 48 hours and will completely replace *Free City*, terminating all of the game's NPCs. He informs Millie, and she tells Guy the truth about his existence, but he becomes distraught and breaks off contact. Guy talks with Buddy and realizes that there is something more to their existence, and they go get the evidence Millie wanted from a gamer who accidentally glitched through the edge of *Free City*'s map and discovered an older build of *Life Itself*, recording the video clip in the process. Antwan sees that the popularity of Blue Shirt Guy threatens his plans to launch *Free City 2* and orders a server reboot, which resets Guy's memories. Guy regains his self-awareness when Millie kisses him.

Guy recalls the location of an island containing remnants of the *Life Itself* build and they attempt to reach the island before the *Free City 2* launch wipes all old content from the servers. Antwan fires Keys, has every player removed from *Free City*, and sends an unfinished Guy-resembling character named Dude into the game. Initially overwhelmed, Guy then puts his sunglasses on Dude, distracting him and allowing Guy to proceed to the island. In a last-ditch attempt to stop him, Antwan begins smashing the game servers in the Soonami offices with a fire axe, erasing Buddy and much of the game world, while firing Mouser. Before he can destroy the final server, Millie offers a deal to abandon her lawsuit and surrender the profits of the *Free City* franchise to him in exchange for her creation.

Edited by	<u>Dean Zimmerman</u>
Music by	<u>Christophe Beck</u>
Production companies	<u>Berlanti Productions</u> <u>21 Laps Entertainment</u> <u>Maximum Effort Lit Entertainment Group</u> <u>TSG Entertainment</u> ^[1]
Distributed by	<u>20th Century Studios</u>
Release dates	August 10, 2021 (<u>Locarno</u>) August 13, 2021 (United States) ^[2]
Running time	115 minutes ^[3]
Country	United States
Language	English
Budget	\$100–125 million ^[4]
Box office	\$331.5 million ^{[1][5]}

Sometime later, sales for *Free City 2* have slipped because of bugs in the code and lagging online play. An embattled Antwan is in the crosshairs, but claims he is a victim. Millie salvages her code and along with Keys and Mouser, releases the indie game *Free Life*, which includes Guy, Dude, and the other NPCs from *Free City*. In the game, Guy reveals to Millie that his code is, in fact, a love letter to her from Keys: During the development of *Life Itself*, Keys had encoded what he knew about her tastes into an AI routine in the game, which was eventually incorporated into *Free City*. This explains why Guy felt uniquely drawn to MolotovGirl. After Millie leaves the game, she and Keys share a kiss. Meanwhile, Guy and Dude reunite with Buddy, who was reconstructed.

Cast

- Ryan Reynolds as Guy / Blue Shirt Guy, a bank teller and non-player character (NPC) in *Free City* who is initially unaware that he is a video game character.
 - Reynolds also provides the uncredited voice and facial motion capture for Dude, an incomplete muscular version of Guy with a blue shirt tattoo on his chest that was made for *Free City 2*. Dude is physically portrayed by bodybuilder Aaron W. Reed.^[9]
- Jodie Comer as Millie Rusk, a player looking inside the game for source code to her original game *Life Itself*, which she co-developed with Keys.^[10] In *Free City*, her avatar is MolotovGirl. Comer wore a short dark-brown wig and used a southern English accent when portraying MolotovGirl. Comer normally speaks with a Liverpool accent.^[11]
- Lil Rel Howery as Buddy, a *Free City* bank security guard and Guy's best friend.
- Joe Keery as Walter "Keys" McKey, a developer for Soonami Studios' technical support department and a Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) graduate who co-developed *Life Itself* with Millie. In *Free City*, his avatar is described as a "dirty stripper cop". Keery had previously worked with director Shawn Levy on *Stranger Things*.
- Utkarsh Ambudkar as Mouser, a developer and Keys's coworker at Soonami Studios' technical support department.^[12] In *Free City*, his avatar is a police officer in a muscular rabbit suit.
- Taika Waititi as Antwan Hovachelik, the ruthless and narcissistic founder and CEO of Soonami Studios who stole the source code for *Life Itself* to make *Free City* with plans to have it replaced with *Free City 2*.^{[13][7]}
- Channing Tatum as Revenjamin Buttons, an avatar in *Free City* who owns a stash house that Guy and MolotovGirl try to break into to obtain incriminating data involving *Life Itself*.
 - Matty Cardarople as Keith, a 22-year-old gamer who plays *Free City* as Revenjamin Buttons.



Ryan Reynolds portrays Guy and voices Dude

Recurring NPCs in *Free City* include Britne Oldford as Missy, a barista; Camille Kostek as the bombshell that was originally associated with Revenjamin Buttons and bank robber #3 before befriending Missy; Mark Lainer as a bank hostage who always has his hands up; Mike Devine as Officer Johnny, a police officer that Guy knows; Sophie Levy as a big city dreamer; Vernon Scott as the manager of the bank that Guy and Buddy work at who would get attacked by bank robbers as part of a *Free City* bonus; Naheem Garcia as Joe, a convenience store owner whose store is always robbed by the players while being thrown

through his window; Anabel Graetz as Phyllis, an elderly cat lady who needs help finding her cats; Ric Plamenco as an ice cream vendor in the part of *Free City* where no quests are; Kenneth Israel as a businessman; Michael Malvesti as a newsstand vendor; Michael Tow as a man who quotes "looks like rain"; Colin Allen as a shoe store clerk; and Bob Gilliam as a news anchor at FCNN (short for Free City News Network).

Soonami Studios' staff include Jonathan De Azevedo as Jonathan, the personal assistant of Antwan; Destiny Claymore as one of the artists at Soonami Studios that develop Dude; Minh-Anh Day as a Soonami Studios employee that informs Antwan that no retailer will carry their bloody zombie video game due to concerns about its nature; and Jose Guns Alves as a Soonami Studios security guard.

The film features cameo appearances from gamers and streamers jacksepticeye, Ninja, Pokimane, DanTDM, and LazarBeam who, in the film, provide commentary on Guy and *Free City* on their respective YouTube and Twitch channels from their own perspectives.^[14]

Actor Chris Evans and Good Morning America host Lara Spencer make cameo appearances as themselves.^{[15][16]} Jeopardy! host Alex Trebek made a posthumous cameo appearance in his final film role before his passing on November 8, 2020.^{[17][18]}

Other voice roles in the film include Hugh Jackman as a masked avatar in an alley (physically portrayed by Patrick Vincent Curran) who MolotovGirl gets the location to Revenjamin Buttons' stash house from, Dwayne Johnson as bank robber #2 (physically portrayed by Owen Burke) whom Guy accidentally shoots while trying to claim his sunglasses, Tina Fey as Keith's mother (portrayed by Regina Taufen) who was vacuuming in the background, and John Krasinski as a silhouetted gamer (physically portrayed by Rosario Corso) who comments about Guy and the NPCs alongside the previously-mentioned gamers and streamers.^{[19][16]}

Production

Development

In August 2016, Matt Lieberman spent three weeks writing the first draft of the spec script for *Free Guy*.^[20] This was sold and entered development at 20th Century Fox prior to being acquired by The Walt Disney Company. *Free Guy* is one of the first Fox films to continue production under Disney's ownership, as well as under the studio's new name of 20th Century Studios.^[21] Director Shawn Levy originally passed on the script. After he was introduced to Ryan Reynolds by mutual friend Hugh Jackman (whom Levy directed in *Real Steel* and Reynolds costarred with in *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*), Levy and Reynolds decided to work on *Free Guy* after rereading it together.^[4] Reynolds, who also produced the film, said, "I haven't been this fully immersed and engaged in something since



Free Guy director Shawn Levy

Deadpool."^[21] Levy had previously been attached to the film *Uncharted*, an adaptation of the video game series of the same name, before he left to make *Free Guy*.^[22]

Filming

Principal photography began on May 14, 2019,^[23] in Boston, mostly around the city's Financial District.^{[24][25]} It also took place in the Massachusetts cities of Worcester,^[26] Framingham (in the former Framingham Savings Bank building),^[27] and Weymouth (at the former Naval Air Station),^[28] as well as at Revere Beach^[29] and the Paramount Pictures studio headquarters in Los Angeles, California. Filming concluded on July 31, 2019.^[23]

Design and cultural references

Levy decided to hire production designer Ethan Tobman over other candidates with more feature film experience after being inspired by the energy he brought to the project. Together they created a visual bible laying out the rules for their video game world. To split the real world from the in-game look they specified colors, lenses, composition and framing, camera movement, and other details.^[22] Levy found it liberating to be influenced by other games and films but not required to make a direct adaptation of an existing franchise.^[22] Tobman said the film's game-world design drew primary inspiration from games like *SimCity*, *The Sims* and *Red Dead Redemption 2*, while also acknowledging thematic inspiration from *Grand Theft Auto* and *Fortnite*.^[8] In order to help Reynolds fully tap into his Guy character after *Deadpool*, Levy suggested that he tap into his Canadian background and act very friendly, full of joy, a typical Canadian citizen. He also found inspiration in Peter Sellers' role in *Being There* and Will Ferrell's role in *Elf* because they played characters who were similar to Guy's character being simple-minded.^[30]

The film features several weapons from other video game and film franchises, including a Mega Buster from *Mega Man*, a lightsaber from *Star Wars*, one of *Fortnite*'s pickaxes, the gravity gun from *Half-Life 2*, the portal gun from *Portal*, as well as Captain America's shield and Hulk's fist from the Marvel Cinematic Universe. When the film was acquired by Disney, which owns the Marvel and *Star Wars* franchises, the filmmakers made a request to use iconic weapons from those properties, and were granted permission to use everything they requested.^{[16][8][22]} The cameo by Chris Evans was suggested by Reynolds' wife Blake Lively.^[31] Levy contacted Evans, who was already in Boston shooting *Defending Jacob* and asked if he would come by for ten minutes, and he agreed.^[32]

Music

The film's score was composed by Christophe Beck.^[33] Portions of the film's score are sampled from the Disney animated short film *Paperman*, which Beck had previously scored. Levy had originally intended to use the song "Your Love" by the Outfield, but Reynolds suggested using "Fantasy" by Mariah Carey instead.^[16] Reynolds talked to Carey about obtaining permission to use it and she allowed them to use the song throughout the film.^[34] A cover version of "Fantasy" sung by Comer was also used in the film.^{[16][22]}

Marketing

When promoting the film in 2019, Reynolds and Waititi joked that it was nice to work together for the first time, pretending that they knew nothing about their previous experience working together on the poorly-received 2011 *Green Lantern* film.^{[35][36][37]} In July 2021, Reynolds released a video on YouTube titled

Deadpool and Korg React, in which he reprised his role as Wade Wilson/Deadpool from the X-Men film series and Waititi reprised his role as Korg from the Marvel Cinematic Universe reacting to the trailer to *Free Guy*.^[38]

On August 12, 2021, Dude became a purchasable outfit in the video game *Fortnite* alongside a series of optional quests placed into the game to allow players to unlock an emote with Reynolds's voice.^[39] *Free Guy*'s marketing team created parody posters in the style of other video games, including *Super Mario 64*, *Minecraft*, *Among Us*, *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, *Mega Man*, *Street Fighter II*, *Doom*, and *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*.^[40]

Release

Theatrical

Free Guy was released in the United States on August 13, 2021^[41] in RealD 3D, IMAX, 4DX and Dolby Cinema formats. It was the first film from Walt Disney Studios during the COVID-19 pandemic released exclusively to theaters for 45 days before releasing on streaming services.^[42] The film was initially scheduled to be released on July 3, 2020, but it was delayed because of the pandemic.^{[43][44][45]} It was then moved to December 11, 2020.^{[46][47]} In November 2020, the studio removed the film, along with *Death on the Nile*, from its upcoming release schedule until further notice.^{[48][49]} The next month, the film was rescheduled to May 21, 2021.^[50] In March, Ryan Reynolds announced that *Free Guy* was delayed to its August date.^[51] The film premiered at the Piazza Grande section of the 74th Locarno Film Festival in Switzerland in August 2021.^[2]

Home media

Free Guy was released on digital on September 28, 2021,^[52] 45 days after its theatrical release,^[53] and was released on 4K,^[54] DVD, and Blu-ray by Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment on October 12,^{[52][55]} two months after its theatrical release. It was added to Disney+ and HBO Max in the United States on February 23, 2022.^{[56][57][58]} According to Samba TV, the film was watched by 2.5 million US households in its first five days of streaming on Disney+ and HBO Max.^[59] According to the streaming aggregator JustWatch, *Free Guy* was the most streamed film across all platforms in the United States, during the week ending February 27, 2022.^[60]

Reception

Box office

Free Guy grossed \$121.6 million in the United States and Canada, and \$209.9 million in other territories, for a worldwide total of \$331.5 million.^{[1][5]}

In the United States and Canada, *Free Guy* was released alongside *Respect* and *Don't Breathe 2*, and was initially projected to gross \$15–18 million from 4,165 theaters in its opening weekend.^[61] However, after making \$10.5 million on its first day (including \$2.2 million from Thursday-night previews), estimates were raised to \$26 million. It went on to debut to \$28.4 million, topping the box office.^[6] The film made \$18.5 million in its second weekend, remaining in first. The drop of just 34% marked the smallest second-

weekend decline of any wide release of the summer, and the second-best of Reynolds' career.^[62] In its third weekend, it was beaten by newcomer *Candyman*, but the film continued to hold well, falling by 27% earning \$13.6 million.^[63]

Critical response

On review aggregator *Rotten Tomatoes*, the film has an approval rating of 80% based on 297 reviews and an average rating of 7/10. The website's critics consensus reads, "Combining a clever concept, sweet, self-aware humor, and a charming cast, *Free Guy* is frivolous fun."^[64] On *Metacritic*, the film has a weighted average score of 62 out of 100 based on 51 critics, indicating "generally favorable reviews".^[65] Audiences polled by *CinemaScore* gave the film an average grade of "A" on an A+ to F scale.^[6]

Peter Debruge of *Variety* magazine called the film an "at-times unwieldy mashup of multiple-reality blockbusters like *The Matrix* and *The Lego Movie*" and said that "*Free Guy* is a lot of fun, despite the fact that Levy and the screenwriters seem to be changing the rules as they go."^[66] Richard Roeper of the *Chicago Sun-Times* lauded both the "perfectly cast" Reynolds and "superb and charming Jodie Comer." Giving the film three out of four stars, he wrote "Thanks in large part to the vibrant, funny, sweet, endearing work by Reynolds and Comer, *Free Guy* delivers."^[67] A.A. Dowd of *The A.V. Club* gave the film a C+ grade and said, "For all its casual mayhem, *Free Guy* turns out to be a rather cuddly crowdpleaser, a high-concept blockbuster trifle with bubblegum ice cream clogging its circuits." Dowd contrasted the film with *The Truman Show*, saying "Reynolds replicates that slightly unhinged Truman Burbank grin but not the

desperation behind it."^[68] Nick De Semlyen of *Empire* was critical of the film; he compared it unfavorably to 2018's *Ready Player One*, and said that although it is "eager to please" it "doesn't really hang together, even as you're watching it."^[69]

Accolades

Award	Date of ceremony	Category	Recipient(s)	Result	Ref.
<u>Academy Awards</u>	<u>March 27, 2022</u>	<u>Best Visual Effects</u>	Swen Gillberg, Bryan Grill, Nikos Kalaitzidis, and Dan Sudick	Nominated	^[70]
<u>British Academy Film Awards</u>	<u>March 13, 2022</u>	<u>Best Special Visual Effects</u>	Swen Gillberg, Bryan Grill, Nikos Kalaitzidis, and Dan Sudick	Nominated	^[71]
<u>Critics' Choice Movie Awards</u>	<u>March 13, 2022</u>	<u>Best Comedy</u>	<i>Free Guy</i>	Nominated	^[72]
<u>Critics' Choice Super Awards</u>	<u>March 17, 2022</u>	<u>Best Science Fiction/Fantasy Movie</u>	<i>Free Guy</i>	Nominated	^[73]
		<u>Best Actor in a Science Fiction/Fantasy Movie</u>	Ryan Reynolds	Nominated	
		<u>Best Actress in a Science Fiction/Fantasy Movie</u>	<u>Jodie Comer</u>	Nominated	
<u>Golden Trailer Awards</u>	<u>October 7, 2022</u>	<u>Best Viral Campaign for a Feature Film</u>	<i>Free Guy</i>	Won	^[74] ^[75]
<u>Hollywood Critics Association Film Awards</u>	<u>February 28, 2022</u>	<u>Best Comedy or Musical</u>	<i>Free Guy</i>	Nominated	^[76] ^[77]
		<u>Best Visual Effects</u>	Swen Gillberg, Bryan Grill, Nikos Kalaitzidis, and Dan Sudick	Nominated	
<u>MTV Movie & TV Awards</u>	<u>June 5, 2022</u>	<u>Best Comedic Performance</u>	Ryan Reynolds	Won	^[78]
		<u>Best Fight</u>	Guy vs. Dude	Nominated	
<u>Nickelodeon Kids' Choice Awards</u>	<u>April 9, 2022</u>	<u>Favorite Movie Actor</u>	Ryan Reynolds	Nominated	^[79]
<u>People's Choice Awards</u>	<u>December 7, 2021</u>	<u>The Comedy Movie of 2021</u>	<i>Free Guy</i>	Won	^[80]
		<u>The Male Movie Star of 2021</u>	<u>Ryan Reynolds</u>	Nominated	
		<u>The Comedy Movie Star of 2021</u>		Nominated	

Saturn Awards	October 25, 2022	Best Science Fiction Film	<i>Free Guy</i>	Nominated	[81][82]
		Best Supporting Actress	Jodie Comer	Nominated	

Possible sequel

On August 14, 2021, following the film's successful first-day box-office gross, Reynolds confirmed that Disney wanted a sequel.^{[83][84]} In March 2022, Steve Asbell, president of 20th Century Studios, said a script was being submitted shortly and called the sequel "a fantastic story".^{[85][86]} Comer has expressed interest in returning for a sequel, stating, "I would honestly jump at the chance to be back on a set with all those guys. [The first movie] was such a joyous experience -- so to hear that that may be in the cards sound like a ton of fun."^[87]

In September 2023, Levy said the story for the sequel was being revised in response to the film *Barbie*. Levy stated, "We are developing a sequel, but the truth is that you now have Barbie that has obviously left a mark about a character in a fictional world who comes to self-awareness. So, we're only gonna make *Free Guy* 2 if it's different than the first movie and if it's different from other movies."^[88]

Notes

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External links

- Official website (<https://www.20thcenturystudios.com/movies/free-guy>)
 - Free Guy* (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6264654/>) at IMDb
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