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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Analysing the Character Types and Power Relationships in Metaverse-Themed Movies from the Perspective of Discipline and Anti-discipline

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ABSTRACT


Since the end of 2021, the concept of “metaverse” has received widespread attention in academic field. Movie sector has long been exploring it prospectively and presenting it innovatively, resulting in the production of metaverse-themed movies. This type of movie has practical significance for the future metaverse thesis. “Character” is an important narrative sign of film composition. This paper starts with several meta-cosmic films, divides the types of characters in meta-cosmic films according to Foucault's theory of spatial power, and analyses their prototype indexes and formation reasons from the constitutive factors of the power relationship, thus explores the power relationship of various types of characters in the metaverse-themed films.

KEYWORDS

Metaverse-themed film; discipline; anti-discipline; metaverse; role types; power relationships

Metaverse, one of the advanced forms of Internet development, is a comprehensive technology concept, “based on immersive Internet technology, Internet of Things technology, interactive technology, video game technology, artificial intelligence technology, Web 3.0, digital collection NFT (Non-Fungible Token), 5G/6G, blockchain technology and digital twin technologies, etc.” (Fang and Fu 2022). Since the end of 2021, this concept has begun to receive widespread attention in the Chinese academic arena, and its core feature lies in the “connection, superposition, entanglement, symbiosis, and fusion of virtual cosmic space and real space” (Pengxin 2022). In fact, the movie has conducted forward-looking artistic exploration and innovative visual presentation of concepts for example “metaverse” for a long time, resulting in the formation of metaverse-themed movies, which is considered by some scholars to be movies with world structure based on the multiple spatial transformations of the protagonist between the real world and the virtual world through a certain medium, (Liang and Lijun 2023) such as *The Matrix* (*The Thirteenth Floor*, 1999), *Ready Player One* (2018), *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012), and *Free Guy* (2021). And “post-human society has evolved into a world where real space and

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virtual space have reciprocal weights, making spatiallybased social transformations possible in the case where virtual space is linked to real space in some way” (Liang and Jaiche 2021). Therefore, the study of metaverse-themed movies is of great practical significance in exploring the technological life towards the age of metaverse (Ruizhi 2022).

In the near future, the meta-cosmic space will become an important carrier for people’s life, work and entertainment, expanding commercial prospects and social influence. Research on metaverse space can help people understand and adapt to this emerging space and provide intellectual support and strategic guidance for future social and economic development. Metaverse space is the expanded space for future human survival and development, Therefore, the study of metaverse-themed films should start with the study of space.

Michel Foucault believed that space is a representation of social power and culture, so it is not only the subject who constructs or produces space but rather the subject’s role in the spatial power to be disciplined (Xingfu 2009). It can be seen that in Foucault’s view, space is not a physical positioning, but contains a broader meaning, a limitation that is invisible and intangible. Foucault argued that space is a web of relations between the self and the other and that our experience of the world is no longer a long life strung together in time. It has become a large point-to-point net cross-linked by its own threads (Xiaohua 2013). In philosophy, we often use Thomas Moore’s *utopia* to refer to the space that does not exist in real world (Karl 2018), and the virtual space in the universe cannot be summarized by “utopia”, as Nicholas Carr’s viewpoints in his book *Digital Utopia*. It can be concluded that the Internet is not utopia (Ji 2018), as the space does really exist. Foucault invented a new term different from “utopia”, namely “anisotopia”. In Foucault’s view, “Utopia” is a place that is not real in the world, but “different Utopia” is not. It is a real existence, but it needs to be understood by the imagination. This concept of alternative space actually dominates the whole spectrum of Foucault’s doctrines. Foucault introduced the concept of “Heterotopia” in his publication *The Order of Things*, “Heterotopia is not an unattainable fantasy, but rather a place where people constantly redefine their selves and their relations with the Other” (Xinran 2015). The multiple parallel universes in metaverse-themed movies are such a space with the characteristics of “Heterotopia” that the study of character types and power relations must be combined with the study of space. The multiple parallel universes in metaverse films are not only related points but also a series of relationship networks, which is a “Heterotopia” with the protagonist as the perspective of leading roles. This paper will start from several metaverse films and take Foucault’s theory of power space as an entry point to study the role types and spatial power relations in metaverse films. Also, this paper will take Foucault’s theory of power space as an entry point to study the relationship between character types and spatial power in meta-cosmic movies. This paper summarizes the role types and power relations in metaverse-themed films and divides them into three parts, the regulating power is the controller of the multiverse space, the surveillance technology is the defender of the multiverse space, and the counter-regulator is the destroyer of the multiverse space. This view will be elaborated below.

1. Controllers of multiverse space: discipline power holders

In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault revealed the control forms of ration over madness, merging spatial space and the rule of power in the example of the mental hospital, where

he argues that medicine becomes justice and treatment a means of repression. The comprehensive treatment of patients in mental hospitals is ostensibly humanitarian medical assistance to special populations by those in control of society, but it is essentially one of the means used by those in control of society to maintain social stability, a method that greatly reduces the threat that mentally ill people pose to the social order. Thus, to ensure social security and stability, psychiatric hospitals resorts to the act of charity to weaken the implied disciplinary purpose that hides behind it, and constructs power space in an imperceptible way (Xingfu 2009). Thus, the psychiatric hospital becomes a space for discipline for the government to manage the patients, and the controlling force behind this Space for discipline is the disciplinary power holder.

In the Space for discipline, the disciplined individuals are always under the gaze of the disciplinary powers, and under the constant influence of the disciplinary powers, they gradually form an inner self-supervision mechanism, through which the disciplinary power holder realizes the disciplining of the disciplined individuals from the inside out. The multiverse space created in metaverse movies is a space for Discipline controlled by disciplinary power holder. The disciplinary power holder sets the rules for the operation of the multiverse, and such rules safeguard the normal operation of the multiverse while at the same time maintaining the interests of the disciplinary power holder.

This is reflected in many meta-universe movies, which show the Space for discipline in a very graphic and concrete way. For example, in the movie *The Matrix*, the main character Neo is a lonely programmer, who stumbles upon the fact that the real world he is in is a computer programme controlled by a machine with the help of a hacker organization, which is called the "The Matrix", and the Matrix is so large that the human world is only a small part of it. In the Matrix world, the machine has gained enormous power and control through the control of the virtual reality of the world's source code, and human beings are forced to become slaves of machines. The machines are disciplined by controlling the minds and senses of human beings, thus providing the machines with a constant supply of energy. The matrix of the machine system that controls the virtual space is the real controller behind the multiverse and is also the powerful disciplining power in this disciplining space. Humans are powerless to resist, and even know nothing about it. Therefore, they can do nothing but follow the rules set by the machine silently in the virtual world, and are forced to be slaves of the machines, if not, they will be strangled by the programme.

In another metaverse film *Wreck-It Ralph*, there are many game consoles in the game hall, and in each seemingly lifeless game console, there is a colourful virtual game world, and the game characters live in that world and work every day to complete the tasks according to the instructions of the players in the game, and after work, they also have their own lives. The game platform connects different virtual game worlds to form a multiverse space, and the game lobby is like the United Nations that manages all game worlds, and the administrator is responsible for dealing with the reports submitted by all game characters and the problems they encounter. In the movie, the administrator is brought to the forefront when a villainous character from the fairy tale world destroys the game *Sugar Rush* in the game lobby. His task is to handle disputes according to the rules of the game world and to keep the game running. The game administrator is a puppet pushed to the foreground by the actual controller of the game world, while the game manufacturer behind him is the real maker of the game rules and the actual

controller of the game's virtual space. Game capitalists control the development of the game market through a series of game operation means. For example, operators can stop updating the game, increase the price of game accessories and interrupt the game service and use other means to make a game gradually withdraw from the market, but also take advantage of the marketing means to quickly launch a new game to control the game market. It can be seen that what is behind the virtual game world is the game capital controlling the lifeblood of the development of the game.

In the movie *Free Guy*, the owner of the game company Antoine controls the whole metaverse game world in all aspects. When the evidence of the crime he hides in the game world is about to be discovered, he sends out the technicians to pursue and intercept the opponents in the meta-universe game world and sets off the storm in the game world, even at the expense of destroying the whole game world to achieve his purpose. In the real world, Antoine even picks up an axe and attempts to smash the game server, not hesitating to destroy the game world by physical methods, and all the employees present dare not stop him. It can be seen that Antoine, as the owner of the game company, has absolute control over the metaverse game world in both the real and virtual worlds and that he is the rule maker of the metaverse game world, and is the power of disciplining behind the game.

It can be seen that there is a big implied hand hidden behind the virtual metaverse world in the metaverse movies. The disciplinary power holder uses the rules to discipline someone who is disciplined.

2. Defenders of multiverse space: surveillance techniques

The purpose of creating a space for discipline is to reform those who are being discipline. The disciplining authority needs more people to assist it in implementing the purpose of disciplining. To realize this purpose in a highly efficient way, the disciplinary power holder designs a space that is conducive to improving the efficiency of the disciplining, just like Bentham's theory of panopticon, which has been called the most efficient prison design, greatly improving the efficiency of surveillance and achieving the maximum surveillance effect with the minimum resources. Panopticon, a prison design, is a ring-shaped prison building which greatly improves the efficiency of surveillance with the minimum resources to achieve maximum surveillance effect. Set up with a watchtower in the middle of the ring, the prison building has two large transparent windows and closed compartments around the watchtower which sends out light in all directions to illuminate the surrounding prison building. In the ring-shaped prison building, inmates can't observe each other because of the dim light. Watchtower is in the action of the surveillance personnel, but the surveillance personnel can see all the inmates' movements in each prison. In this divided unit space, communication between prisoners is blocked, effectively eliminating the collective effect caused by communication (Qiang et al. 2015). Because the line of sight is restricted, the prisoners are placed in a one-way state of being gazed at, this state of being gazed at forms a ubiquitous, all-the-time surveillance effect, to achieve the purpose of maximizing the effect of surveillance with the least number of people and exerting the power of the monitor to the extreme, thus effectively reducing the cost of controlling the inmates. This cheap and efficient form of prison is known as the "panopticon". This kind of supervision and management is called

surveillance technology. It is like the camera in the supermarket with no dead angle, the electronic eye at the intersection to catch the fear at any time. They all effectively maintain the normal operation of the Space for discipline. We have already discussed that the multiverse space is the Space for discipline, so there are also surveillance technologies in the multiverse space to maintain the normal operation of the multiverse space.

This kind of surveillance technology is not always unchanged but in various forms. The surveillance technology can be a person or a programme, or a device, such as in the film *The Matrix*, after Neo's discovery of their own life in the virtual world controlled by the machine, Neo, Morpheus and Trinity embarked on the road to save mankind together. While exploring the Matrix, they are pursued by an agent programme (Agent Smith) that tries to kill them and destroy their plans. This Agent Programme is the surveillance technology that maintains the power of regulation, and it uses repression to exhort humanity to submit to the rule of the Matrix or they will be killed.

The metaverse-themed movie *Wreck-It Ralph* that shows the game characters' behaviour to the player in real-time through the screen at all times is also a surveillance technology. As the characters can be seen in the film to occasionally make small gestures of avoidance or covering up, it can be seen that each of the game characters understands the existence of this surveillance technology. This kind of surveillance technology can also be a kind of character type. Foucault's "Madness and Civilization" mentioned that the medical staff in hospitals, mental hospitals, and other places of disciplining are always observing every move of the patients and make timely treatment of the abnormal conditions of the patients, and the gaze of the medical staff is the surveillance technology here. The diversification of surveillance techniques makes the surveillance of disciplinary power holder covert and undetectable. The security guards patrol the supermarket, the teachers invigilate the exams in the examination hall, and the traffic police conduct security checks at the intersection, these are all role-based surveillance technologies. This can also be verified in the movie *Free Guy* in which a virtual game world is built, and there are no real-world legal constraints, but rather a set of systems dominated by game controllers, and game administrators with mouse and keyboard take on supervisory and managerial duties. On the one hand, they maintain the normal operation of the game, and on the other hand, through their special means, they persuade the players to obey the disciplinary power. Through the observation of several film cases, we find that the space for discipline is a kind of dynamic relationship network, the power-related subjects interacting with each other and exerting influence on each other. Supervision technology maintains the normal operation of the space for discipline, which can be inanimate programmes or equipment, or a role type, assumed to maintain the order of the space to ensure that the space of the normal operation of the task in the metaverse space.

3. Destroyers of multiverse space: the anti-discipliners

As Foucault said in *Madness and Civilization*, mental hospitals represent the authoritative force behind confinement, and the mentally ill patients are suppressed as disciplined persons, thus gradually losing their subjectivity. This treatment of mental illness was on the one hand a means of helping and caring for this special group of people, and on the other hand, a means for the rulers to maintain social stability. According to the different reactions of the disciplined in the face of discipline, the disciplined can be

divided into three types. The first type is the disciplined who are powerless to resist and yield to the disciplinary power. This kind of group gradually accepts the transformation of the disciplinary power and produces a sense of identity to the discipline from the inside out. They not only obey the discipline by themselves, but also exhort others to yield to the disciplinary power, and gradually becomes the maintenance power of the space for discipline. This kind of maintenance power is the surveillance technology in the space of discipline, which may be a person or some kind of external force to realize the supervision. For example, in the movie *Free Guy*, the following camera of each character in the virtual game world is a kind of inanimate surveillance technology, which displays every move of the player character in the virtual game world on the computer screen, realizing the supervision of the disciplinary power on the disciplined.

In the second type of surveillance, the disciplined show indifference to the disciplinary power. They show aphasia in front of the disciplining, neither objecting the disciplining nor supporting the disciplining, and the attitude of submissiveness they show in the face of the disciplining will compel them to be repeatedly placed in the space for receiving disciplining. In the end, they become the residual in the disciplining process, just as in the movie *The Matrix*, human beings live in a world controlled by machines and are forced to become the slaves of the machines and the energy suppliers of the machines, but most of them don't know anything about it.

In the third type, which is also the focus of this article's research, the disciplined do not yield to the disciplinary power, and are very rebellious. They will interfere with the operation of the space for discipline with their actions to destroy the order, and even use their views to awaken the rebellious consciousness of more disciplined individuals to increase the number of disciplinarians and cause devastating damages to the disciplinary power, thus achieving the reverse disciplining of the disciplinary power, which is the Anti-disciplinarians of the multiverse (Anti-disciplinarians) proposed in this paper. In the metaverse-themed movie *The Matrix*, Neo learns from the other two hackers, Morpheus and Trinity, that in the real world, humans have long been enslaved by machines, and that they live in a virtual world constructed by machines. Neo fails to recognize this fact and decides to become the saviour of humanity. Together, Neo, Morpheus and Trinity embark on a journey to free humanity. Becoming a saviour, Neo is a regulated and awakened person in the virtual world under the rule of the machine. Neo learns how to use the superpowers in the matrix to control the environment of virtual reality and survives in the final battle. The fact that he succeeds in destroying the proxy programme that has rendered humanity helpless is a reflection of the fact that the disciplined are converted into anti-disciplinarians under certain conditions. In the film *Ready Player One*, the protagonist, Wade Watts, is an ordinary player in an oasis. In real life, he is poor and downtrodden, so he puts all his attention into the virtual game treasure hunt and becomes the disciplined in the game, but in the process of searching for the egg, he makes a group of friends. From his friends, he learns to share his feelings and experiences with others, understands the importance of caring for others, and discovers the sense of justice and courage hidden in his own heart, and is willing to give up everything for the sake of protecting the oasis and his friends. In the end, Watts turns from a virtual game disciplinarian into an anti-disciplinarian, who is not obsessed with the virtual game but realizes his value in his way, and at the same time proves to us the connection and correspondence between the virtual world and the real world. The virtual world of the metaverse is at first only a space or

means for human consciousness to be disciplined, but with the development of artificial intelligence, it will eventually turn into an anti-disciplinarian, triggering philosophical thinking of human beings about the future. In the movie *Free Guy*, Guy, an NPC character in the game world of the metaverse, is only a disciplined and silent person with no self-consciousness, but he accidentally awakens his self-consciousness after encountering the female protagonist Miri, and Guy learns about the conspiracy outside the game world. They decided to lead all NPCs to rise together. Under his lobbying, they successfully awaken the NPC character's inner self-consciousness. Finally, the NPC character and Miri pull together and defeat the evil forces and save the virtual game world. The Anti-disciplinarians will resist disciplinary power, disrupt the order of disciplinary space, and even form reverse disciplinary actions against those who control spatial power, all of which will trigger philosophical thinking about the future for humanity.

It can be seen through the above-mentioned case, the disciplined, in accepting the disciplinary power of discipline, will show three different attitudes towards discipline and form three different bodies. The three are dynamically related and can be converted to each other under certain conditions. The first kind of identification with the power of discipline is the defender of discipline, which will be transformed into a surveillance technology in the space of discipline, and the identification with discipline will be internalized to form the influencing factors on other disciplinarians, and eventually go to discipline others, which plays a reinforcing role for the power of discipline. The second kind of numbness or indifference to the power of discipline is the silent group. They will be transformed into the rebellious aphasic one who will not rebel against or support the discipline, and eventually become the residual subject in the process of discipline and these residuals will be forced to be the target of a new round of disciplining by the power of disciplining and continue to receive repeated disciplining. And the disciplinary power will repeatedly initiate disciplinary training on the trainees until it undergoes a transformation. The third type of the discipline are those who do not identify with the power of disciplining and will be transformed into the saboteurs of disciplining. They will bravely fight with the power of disciplining, and ultimately be transformed into the anti-disciplinarians, which will have a reverse effect on the disciplinary power holder. Anti-disciplinarians present valuable spiritual qualities found in ordinary people. Their spirits of courage, perseverance, and fearlessness provide important emotional value to the audience. Without anti-conformists, there would be no ups and downs in the plot. Therefore, anti-conformists are the focus of character development in metaverse-themed films and a key factor in driving the narrative of the entire film (Figure 1).

4. Regulatory procedures: revealing character types and power relations in metaverse-themed films

Combined with several metauniverse-themed movies such as *The Matrix*, *Ready Player One*, *Wreck-It Ralph*, and *Free Guy*, the analysis of the character type power relations of metaverse-themed movies based on Foucault's space power theoretical system concludes that, in metaverse-themed movies, the multiverses and parallel universes are a complex relational field, and that the multiverses and parallel universes are the Space for disciplines elaborated by the disciplinary power holder, and the controller of the multiverses is the disciplinary power holder behind it, the maintainer of the multiverses is the surveillance

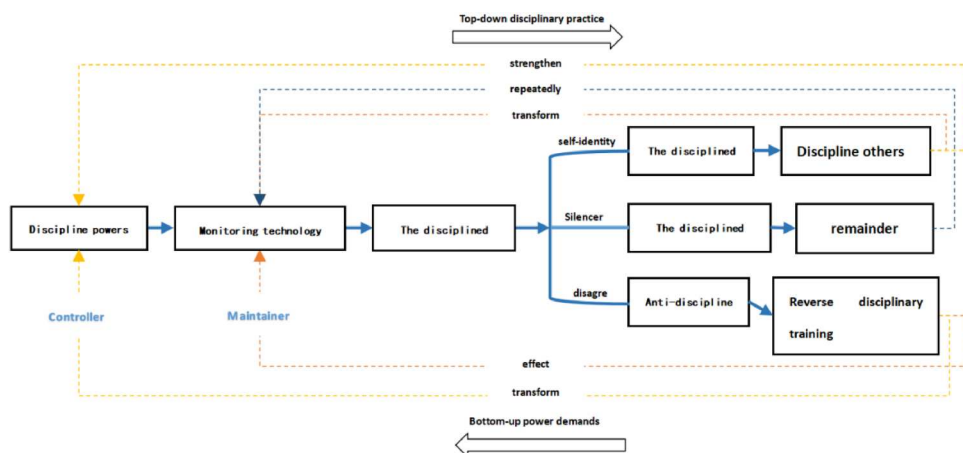


Figure 1. Regulatory procedures for meta-universe-themed films.

technology, and the destroyer of the multiverses is the anti-discipliner. The types of characters in the metaverse movie are dynamically related to the power relationship, and they transform into each other under certain conditions according to the process shown by the discipline programme.

In this paper, we summarize the role types and power relations as well as discipline procedures in metaverse-themed movies. The disciplinary power holder creates a Space for discipline through physical space or invisible power, and in the face of disciplining the disciplined shows different coping strategies, and the disciplinary power acts on the disciplined through surveillance technology, and is divided into three types according to the degree of their disciplining.

First, those who have succumbed to the power of disciplining under the gaze of the surveillance technology, they identify themselves with the power of disciplining from the inside out, and while their own space is being transformed by the disciplining, they also act as the maintainers of the power of disciplining, influencing the space of the others, facilitating the achievement of the results of the others' being trained, and consolidating the power of the disciplining.

Second, those who have lost their voice in the face of the disciplining, or those who have been silenced. Most of the people in the space for discipline are neither supportive of nor capable of resisting the disciplining. This kind of disciplined personnel will be repeatedly put under the gaze of surveillance technology in the disciplinary programme, and gradually lose their subjectivity in the repeated disciplinary process, and will eventually be reduced to the "remnant disciplined personnel" in the space of the multiverse (Liang and Lijun 2023). This is the predicament faced by most people in the multiverse.

Third, the anti-discipliners who resist the power. This kind of disciplined personnel do not obey the power to be disciplined and bravely fight against it whose behaviour will disrupt the order of the disciplining space, break the balance of the disciplining space, and even overthrow the rule of the existing power of the disciplining and establish a new space for disciplining. They are also the reverse of the disciplining of the power holder, and the anti-discipliners will turn into new disciplined personnel under certain conditions. Under certain conditions, the anti-discipliners will be transformed into the

new disciplinary power holder. A new process of discipline begins with the creation of a new Space for discipline.

Conclusion: Defenders, silencers, and rebels are the three major role types in metaverse-themed movie, and they interact with each other and exert influence on each other and can be transformed into each other under certain conditions. Film art can serve as a discipline and education for the public. Metaverse-themed films, as an emerging form of film, also serve as the functions of discipline and education. If metaverse-themed films are a means of regulation, then the virtual space explored by metaverse-themed films is a regulatory space, and the regulatory power behind this regulatory space is the commercial capital in the film industry. Capital is profit driven, and in order to maximize profits, film capital promotes its film through online and offline marketing methods. It uses inspiring stories that shape ordinary characters into anti-conformists, making audiences addicted to them, and trains audiences who come to watch through the achievement of emotional value. The audience realizes that the transformation of the subject in the training process, ultimately achieving the goal of film capital profit. The role types and power relations in metaverse-themed films not only provide us with directions for in-depth analysis of metaverse-themed films and ideas for the creation of metaverse-themed films, but also provide creative discussions and vivid previews for exploring the power relations, scientific and technological life and the development of human civilization in the metaverse, which can help us avoid the potential risks in the metaverse.

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