The Development and Genre Characteristics of Metaverse Films

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Abstract. Under the impetus of the metaverse, metaverse films are emerging as a distinct genre. Metaverse films represent a new cinematic category that establishes a symbiotic relationship between two worlds: the virtual and the real, depicting potential future human existence and reflecting societal contemplations about the future. Since the 21st century, metaverse films have consistently seen a rise in box office revenue, with many in the metaverse film genre already planning sequels, indicating a rapid development trend. The metaverse has transitioned from a mere cinematic theme to a tangible reality, where the future metaverse is both cinematic and real, making the prospects of metaverse film development incalculable. The genre characteristics of metaverse films primarily encompass: a profound convergence of the virtual and real worlds, a strong influence of gaming elements, a theme of reality over virtuality, and a narrative structure featuring grassroots heroes saving the world.

Keywords: Metaverse, Genre Film, Virtual World

1   Introduction

In 2021, Mark Zuckerberg renamed Facebook, a social networking platform with over three billion users, to "Meta," marking a pivotal moment in the history of metaverse development. Companies such as Microsoft, Google, Apple, Tencent, Huawei, Baidu, and Alibaba swiftly followed suit, contributing to the ever-evolving landscape of the metaverse in both technology and applications. The metaverse is widely regarded as the future direction of the internet, and in light of this understanding, since the new century, movies centered around the metaverse have surged in popularity. Films like "Ready Player One", "Free Guy", "Other Life", "Inception," "Spider-Man: No Way Home," and "The Matrix" series have captured the hearts of audiences. Originating from gaming scenarios, metaverse-themed films often construct highly virtual worlds through the medium of gaming. Genre films are a product of the systematic film industry and represent a form of popular art that caters to the needs of the masses. According to the Dictionary of Film Art, genre films are defined as "a commercial representation of artistic creation. Producers imitate many popular films to maximize profits, gradually forming relatively fixed patterns of films - genres"[1] (Xu, et al. 2005).

Metaverse films are currently emerging, yet there is a regrettable lack of timely analysis of this genre, which cannot be overlooked.

2   What is the Metaverse movie

As major tech giants intensify their investments in the metaverse, it is having a profound impact on the development of films, leading to an inseparable relationship between movies and the metaverse. Given the current state of metaverse development, the author believes it is important to differentiate between the concepts of metaverse films and cinematic metaverse. Metaverse films refer to movies centered around the metaverse theme, whereas cinematic metaverse refers to the new appearance of films after integrating the metaverse, showcasing features such as immersive experiences, human-computer interaction, and decentralization. As an academic concept, clear definitions must be established in terms of content and scope, as there is currently no precise demarcation between metaverse films and cinematic metaverse. As a genre of film, the characteristics and aesthetic value of metaverse-themed films can only be truly understood through comparison. The emergence of films with metaverse themes is not only tied to the development of the metaverse itself but is also influenced by other genres of film.

The categorization of literature and art genres involves classifying a vast array of works into common threads. Japanese scholar Toshio Takeuchi (1990) stated, when discussing literary and artistic genres, "This concept encompasses both the commonality of oneself and the distinctiveness of others, and it grasps a certain range of existing entities from these two perspectives. Therefore, all genres are capable of forming a unity within themselves while also being able to differentiate from others, serving as a medium for universality and individuality, diversity and unity"[2]. Games serve as the origin of the metaverse, and most metaverse films depict the interplay between the real and virtual worlds, presenting two distinct dimensions. This bears some resemblance to time-travel films. Metaverse films, time-travel films, and game-based films share a "family resemblance," and the relationship between metaverse films and the latter two genres provides a crucial perspective for examining the genre characteristics of metaverse films.

Let's first look at the differences between metaverse films and time-travel films. Both metaverse films and time-travel films break the constraints of time and space, narrating stories through temporal shifts. While they both share the characteristic of time and space traversal, there are clear distinctions as well. Firstly, time-travel films do not alter the present reality, whether the characters travel to the past or the future, the real world is considered an unchangeable objective existence. In the film "Source Code," the protagonist repeatedly goes back in time to do various things, but the present reality remains unchanged. The scriptwriter explains: "It's a release. He can change things without consequence—it's a rule we set up in storytelling, and it's never broken." On the other hand, metaverse films involve a symbiotic relationship between the virtual and real worlds, where actions in one world affect the other, and vice versa. In "Ready Player One," game equipment purchased in the virtual world is deliv-

ered to the real world, and victories in the virtual world is also translated into tangible benefits in reality. Secondly, time-travel films often draw on macroscopic scientific theories, such as Stephen Hawking's theory of Wormholes, Space-time tunnels based on relativity, the "Butterfly Effect," etc. They aim to provide aesthetic enjoyment beyond ordinary life experiences. Metaverse films, on the other hand, extrapolate potential future human existence based on contemporary internet technology logic. The metaverse transcends the limitations of the two-dimensional internet, immersing humans in a three-dimensional world. This world accommodates various aspects of the physical world, such as tourism, shopping, work, education, and also enables human-computer interaction, modification, and transformation of this world. The metaverse is an extension of physical reality, a manifestation of deeply mediated human society. Its theoretical and practical foundations differ from those of time-travel films. Thirdly, time-travel films are implausible in reality, reflecting people's nostalgia, anxieties about reality, curiosity, and desires for rebirth. The metaverse represents a plausible transformation into reality, embodying people's visions for the imminent future. In essence, metaverse films and time-travel films exhibit significant differences.

Next, let's examine the differences between metaverse films and game-based films. Game-based films generally refer to movies that are centered around games as a theme or employ game engines to allow audiences to engage in three-dimensional gaming activities within the film. The growing gaming community has led to the emergence of game-based films as a new genre. Game-based films revolve around gaming, targeting potential audiences of gamers, and showcase the interests of gaming enthusiasts.

Although metaverse films exhibit strong gaming elements, their narrative and aesthetic interests differ from game-based films. Firstly, their value orientations diverge. Game-based films showcase the process of gaming, with a focus on plotlines related to gameplay achievements. Movies like "Tomb Raider," "Resident Evil," and "The Legend of Sword and Fairy" are adaptations of video games with protagonists successfully completing challenging levels. Interactive game-based films record the successful completion of game levels, almost paralleling game adaptations. They cater to the interests of gamers. In contrast, metaverse films emphasize realism, reflecting on societal issues through the comparison between the virtual and real worlds. "The Matrix" critiques the dangers of technology, "Free Guy" encourages cherishing real emotions in the real world, and "Memories of the Alhambra" critiques the virtual world. If game-based films represent "life as a game," then metaverse films represent "the game of life." The latter encompasses life within the game, while the former is merely a game.

Secondly, game-based films typically don't assume the existence of both real and virtual worlds, whereas metaverse films explicitly present a binary world structure. Films like "Alice in Wonderland" and "Counter-Strike" exist solely within the game world, whereas metaverse films portray both virtual and real worlds. This is a distinct difference between the two.

Thirdly, game-based films primarily target gaming enthusiasts, while the metaverse films cater to a broader audience across various demographics. Game-

based films often draw material from popular games like "Tomb Raider," "Need for Speed," "Warcraft," and "Resident Evil," generating buzz among gamers but receiving relatively lukewarm responses from non-gamers. In contrast, metaverse films reflect the impact of technology on humanity, carrying philosophical themes, and appealing to a much wider audience than game-based films.

Metaverse films emerge in tandem with the concept of the metaverse, and as a distinct film genre, its definition should closely relate to the practical aspects of the metaverse. Through comparisons with game-based films and time-travel films, we can provide a definition for metaverse films: Metaverse films represent a novel genre of cinema that establishes an interwoven connection between two realms: the virtual world and the real world. These films depict potential future human existence and serve as a reflection of societal contemplations about the future. In doing so, metaverse films delve into the dynamic interplay between the virtual and the real, encapsulating the possibilities of human survival in the ever-evolving metaverse landscape.

3   The Development of Metaverse-themed Films

In the 1980s, American scientist Jaron Lanier first introduced the concept of Virtual Reality (VR). Subsequently, he co-founded VPL Research with Tom Zimmerman, dedicating their efforts to the research of three-dimensional virtual environments, thereby laying the foundation for VR technology. In October 2021, Mark Zuckerberg renamed Facebook to Meta, marking the official eruption of the metaverse concept, and the year 2021 was dubbed the "Year of the Metaverse." The metaverse represents a profound evolution of internet technology, with its impact expected to extend across various sectors of society.

While the metaverse trend has gained tremendous momentum in the past couple of years, the concept of parallel realities—virtual and real—has roots dating back to ancient times[3] (Julia Kristeva, 2015). Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" already hinted at the contrast between the real world and the shadowy virtual realm. Various forms of ancient art also featured the interplay and fusion of virtual and real worlds, serving as early manifestations of the metaverse. Neal Stephenson's "Snow Crash" introduced the concept of the Metaverse, based on virtual reality technology. Influenced by "Snow Crash," Linden Lab launched the online virtual game "Second Life" in 2003. This platform allowed players to engage in a multitude of activities such as traveling, driving, shopping, and communication. Some countries even established virtual embassies within the game.

Both gaming and science fiction novels are the birthplaces of the metaverse and serve as sources of inspiration for metaverse-themed films. Movies like "Ready Player One," "Free Guy," "Black Mirror: Bandersnatch," "Star Trek: The Next Generation," "Memories of the Alhambra," "Spider-Man: No Way Home," and "The Matrix" are all based on metaverse-themed sci-fi novels and games.

The development of the metaverse can be categorized into three stages: cloud gaming, digital twins, and virtual and real symbiosis, with the latter representing the pin-

nacle of metaverse development. Despite the recent fervor surrounding the metaverse, its development is still in its infancy. Mark Zuckerberg himself acknowledges that the metaverse is not yet mature and is a future-oriented concept.

American scholar Hubert Dreyfus (2014) contends, "The idea that we could now live a memorable and meaningful life in the metaverse is a fantasy. For the time being, if we want to live well, we must engage in an embodied attitude toward the risky, emotionally changeable world we find ourselves in."[4] Art possesses transcendence, and the metaverse belongs to the future. Metaverse films are an expression of future life. Movies like "Ready Player One" and "Free Guy" have achieved substantial box office revenues, with the former surpassing a billion RMB in domestic box office. "Ready Player One 2" is already in the planning stage, and "Free Guy" grossed over 500 million RMB in just 18 days. The strong audience response hints at the vast potential for development in the metaverse film market. With the lure of high box office earnings, several metaverse films are currently in active development. "Starting with 'Free Guy,' a Hollywood commercial film genre has officially formed, focusing on summoning a generation of players with gaming experience, exploring the gaming spirit and ethics within virtual worlds. This genre has entered a stage of replicable mass production"[5]（Wang, 2022). The rapid growth of the metaverse provides a solid foundation for metaverse films, and the genre's distinct characteristics are becoming increasingly prominent.

If we consider metaverse films as purely imaginative events, then cinematic metaverse represents the tangible existence of the metaverse. Films centered around the metaverse are just the first step in the development of metaverse films; the evolution of metaverse technology is reshaping the very form of cinema. Mark Zuckerberg （2021） stated, "We went from desktop to web, and web to phones. Now we're going to go from phones to immersive experiences... You're going to be able to feel like you're right there in the metaverse, not looking at it from the outside. That's what we mean by the 'metaverse.'"[6] Metaverse films are transitioning from being mere subjects to becoming an integral part of reality in the film industry[7]. Metaverse elements are being incorporated into films, both in the early stages and throughout production （Manovich, 2020).

Following the IMAX 3D production of "Avatar," Chinese film "Twin Killers" was shot using "4K+3D+120fps" technology. China's first offline "metaverse theater" emerged in early 2022 in Shenzhen, featuring a 360-degree screen to provide immersive experiences to the audience. On August 2, 2022, the metaverse film "Mechanical Player," exclusively broadcasted on Tencent Video, hosted a metaverse livestream event with virtual and real interactive scenes. Attendees could customize their appearance and identity when entering the highly realistic virtual cinema. They could also choose their seats and engage in live interactions with the creators. This virtual event was considered a "significant milestone" in the development of metaverse films in China.

4   Genre Characteristics of Metaverse-themed Films

4.1   High Intersection of Virtual and Real Worlds

Artistic creations often establish a distinct artistic realm that differentiates from the real world. This artistic world is essentially a virtual construct, often depicting an idealistic or dystopian landscape[8] (Clough, 2008). In the context of metaverse films, the essential element is the simultaneous coexistence and interaction between virtual and real worlds. Unlike traditional films that might portray the virtual world as a utopia, in metaverse films, these two worlds are intricately intertwined, with a symbiotic relationship. The actions in one world directly impact the other.

In "Ready Player One," characters in the real world enter the virtual world through avatars, and their actions within the virtual realm have tangible consequences in reality. The protagonist, Wade, accesses the "Oasis" through VR equipment, discovers hidden Easter eggs, and transforms from an underdog to a hero. "Free Guy" takes this concept even further, granting NPCs (non-player characters) in a video game self-awareness. The game's designer not only falls in love with an NPC but also teams up with them to unveil the game company's conspiracy.

"Memories of the Alhambra" juxtaposes the virtual world and the real world, high-lighting the protagonist's struggles caused by the virtual realm. In metaverse films, the virtual and real worlds do not merely coexist; they intersect and drive the plot forward. This interplay generates dramatic tension and serves as a significant hallmark of metaverse films. The convergence of these worlds is a key characteristic that sets metaverse films apart.

4.2   Intense Gaming Elements

Games are the origin of the metaverse, and many films draw inspiration from the gaming world. As a result, contemporary metaverse films are heavily influenced by gaming culture. In "Ready Player One," the main plot revolves around the search for Easter eggs within the game world known as the "Oasis," depicting the challenges and achievements of players progressing through the game. Similarly, in "Free Guy," the focus is on the game world of "Free City," showcasing the evolution of NPC characters and the legal battles over the game's copyrights. The films often incorporate scenes of game-style combat, with "Free Guy" reimagining street violence akin to video game gameplay, featuring various weapons, Easter eggs, cars, and scenes highly reminiscent of popular games.

The film "The Game Is Life" opens with intense gunfights, transitioning into a series of bloody and violent scenes as the protagonist enters the virtual game. The entire movie exudes a certain aesthetic of violent gameplay. "Ready Player One" integrates combat styles from games like "Red Dead Redemption," "SimCity," "Player Unknown's Battlegrounds," and "Fortnite," reproducing the fighting dynamics of these games. The incorporation of various gaming elements adds an extra layer of excitement to the film, with in-game challenges, strategies, and the pursuit of gamer fame resonating deeply with gaming enthusiasts. Metaverse films represent a profound

fusion of gaming and cinema, where the games portrayed in the movies reflect real-world games. The characters within these films experience their life ideals through gameplay, showcasing an elevated form of contemporary gaming culture and revealing the true essence of a life intertwined with gaming.

4.3   Emphasis on Reality over Virtuality

Metaverse films establish two intertwined worlds: the virtual and the real. While these worlds rely on each other, the films consistently remind audiences that the reality is what truly deserves appreciation, urging against becoming entrapped in the allure of the virtual world without returning to reality[9] (Ihde, 2002). Philosopher Bernard Stiegler warned, "Technology develops for itself, with its development being its own goal, fully self-sufficient and self-regulating. It even legislates for all things. This development has always been seen as excess itself, that is, as the alienating force that makes man lose 'freedom,' suppressing time while excluding the future or change" [10](Stiegler, 2000). Metaverse films confront the future of human technology, expressing a cautious attitude towards the dual nature of technology. In "Ready Player One," set in 2045, metaverse technology has matured, and people are consumed by the virtual world, using VR devices to enter this virtual reality as an integral part of their lives. Through the character Samantha, Spielberg expresses his concern: "You've lost sight of what's real." In an interview, Spielberg stated, "Some technological devices are causing people to escape real-life experiences, yet digital communication is far inferior to face-to-face emotional connection." Rejecting illusions manufactured by technology is the metaverse film's stance on modern technology.

In "Free Guy," the female protagonist, Millie, sparks a romantic connection with an NPC character within the game world. This virtual romance initially captivates her, but Millie ultimately discovers that genuine love exists in reality, and virtual love remains an ideal. Millie's character serves as a reminder that the true world is where we should stand firm, cautioning against being ensnared by the virtual realm. Despite the pronounced gaming elements, metaverse films critically address the escapism often associated with gaming. In this regard, metaverse films tend to offer deeper philosophical insights compared to conventional popcorn movies.

4.4   The Narrative Pattern of Grassroots Heroes Saving the World

Hollywood's "superhero" films have garnered immense popularity among audiences worldwide, with iconic characters like Spider-Man, Wolverine, and Captain America becoming deeply ingrained in popular culture. The narrative pattern often employed in "superhero" films follows a formula of "conflict arises - hero emerges - victory achieved." The protagonists of these films typically possess extraordinary powers. In contrast, metaverse films often feature protagonists who are gamers or programmers, individuals with relatively modest identities, yet they play pivotal roles in shaping the outcome. The narrative pattern of "grassroots heroes saving the world" is a common trope in metaverse films, blurring the lines of the familiar narrative approach of "superhero" movies.

In "Free Guy," the NPC characters within the "Free City" game world not only serve as saviors within the game but also expose the conspiracies of the game company, showcasing a form of heroism. While "superhero" films usually revolve around a single timeline with protagonists possessing extraordinary natural abilities, "Free Guy" introduces a protagonist who is an NPC character in the virtual world. This innovative character concept resonates with numerous gamers, providing a refreshing twist. Although metaverse films adhere to the narrative template of "superhero" films, the introduction of new elements and characters expands the artistic tension and enhances the films' expressive capabilities.

In "Ready Player One," the protagonist, Wade Watts, faces the challenge of defeating formidable opponents within the virtual game world while also evading pursuit by real-world adversaries. This dual struggle between two worlds highlights the heroic nature of the character. As a new genre, metaverse films do not significantly innovate the narrative patterns. Instead, they amalgamate various cinematic modes, such as "superhero" films, science fiction, and gaming-based narratives, evoking a sense of "old wine in new bottles."

5   Conclusion

Driven by the larger societal context, movies centered around the concept of the metaverse are gaining increasing momentum, and the genre of metaverse films is gaining recognition among people. Metaverse films are emerging as a new genre of cinema, and this genre will grow and evolve in symbiosis with metaverse technology. Currently, metaverse films exhibit distinct characteristics, including a high degree of intersection between virtual and real worlds, pronounced gaming elements, a focus on realism over escapism, and a narrative pattern of grassroots heroes saving the world. Similar to metaverse technology, metaverse films are poised to become a fresh focal point in both the industry and academic research.

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