

Foucault's Dungeon: A Study of Metaspace Authenticity in *Ready Player One*

Xiteng Wang, Sihan Huang, Qilan Liang^{a,*}

School of Foreign Language Studies, Guangzhou University, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China

784767600@qq.com

*Corresponding author

Keywords: Metaspace, Foucault, Discipline, Digital Capital *Ready Player One*

Abstract: In the 21st century, with the rapid development of information technology, virtual reality technology, and network technology continue to be deeply combined. The series of scenes shown in *Ready Player One* are very likely to happen in the future. Therefore, the significance of the reality warning of the novel is also more profound. This article will analyse the metaverse described in *Ready Player One* based on Foucault's theory and Marxist philosophical theory. The meta-space refers to a virtual world that can be mapped and interacted with the real world built by human beings based on real information and virtual information through scientific and technological means. The connection between the meta-space and human civilization, the contradiction with the real social system, and the operation theory behind it are all worthy of further exploration. This article will take *Ready Player One* as an example to explore the relationship between virtual and real world in the metaverse from individuals to groups.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

Today's era is the era of digital information technology, in which human beings are experiencing unprecedented impact. In China, for example, "As of December 2021, the size of China's Internet users reached 1.032 billion, an increase of 42.96 million over December 2020, and the Internet penetration rate reached 73.0%." [1] The development of new technologies such as the Internet of Things, mobile Internet, artificial intelligence, cloud computing, and the "lane changing" 5G is not just a process of material transformation in the traditional sense. In this process, technology is deeply socialized and "brings about the technologization of society." In this process. New technologies have influenced the reconfiguration of social relations and even subverted many aspects of human society. Science fiction as a literary genre profoundly responds to the technological development of society, the contradictions between man and technology, and provides ethical reflections on the direction of technological development.

1.2. The Significance and Creativity of the Study

As a kind of artistic narrative reflecting on technology, science fiction texts are based on the current state of scientific development, imagining the future, using a humanistic perspective to understand technology, and reflecting on the relationship between man and technology. From this perspective, the interpretation of science fiction texts is necessary and meaningful. The work *Ready Player One* is a scientific and technological exposition of literature in the context of meta-universe development. "Meta-space literature is based on 'the interpretation of the three-dimensional dimension of technology-human-literature' in the current context" (Wang & Liu 2022: 17) [2] After analysing *Ready Player One*, many scholars pointed out the "dystopian" nature of the metaverse from various aspects.

Ready Player One presents such thoughts and concerns to technology directly. The story in novel not happens in the unattainable future, but in the near future - 2045. The combination of virtual reality technology with network technology and gaming technology is being realized. The film shows a series of scenarios that are highly likely to happen in the future. "It questions what kinds of

spaces are actually spaces. It takes positions on what gives human life authenticity and integrity, on what kinds of relationships matter, and challenges audiences to rethink what makes an identity real.” (Monteith, 2022) [3] Therefore, the significance of the reality warning of *Ready Player One* is even more profound.

2. Analysis of Ready Player One under Theories of Foucault

In this part, the author will focus on Foucault's theory and the two contrasting digital capitalist roles, Halliday and Sorrento. The author will combine the details of the text to explain how Halliday was shaped by social discipline into a madman, how he became a manipulator of truth, and finally completed “self-practice” with the help of others. At the same time, the author will explain the disciplinary strategies of the capital company in the context of Sorrento's identity and IOI Capital.

2.1. Power Discourse Strategies of Halliday to Finish Self-Governance

Halliday’s last words serve as the highest level of power words to manipulate all the characters in the story. Although Halliday is a character who dies right at the beginning, even after his death, people are manipulated by his words in both virtual and real space. In the novel, the author borrows retro sentiment and good intention of gaming ideal to blur the huge digital capital power that Halliday possesses.

The name “Oasis” implies the meaning of Utopia. In Utopia, everyone is equal. Power and money are the dung of Utopia. In such a world, money will not circulate, and discipline cannot exist. In fact, the reason why Halliday established the digital utopia of “Oasis” is mostly to escape the discipline of the real society. His mother had a history of manic-depressive psychosis, and his father was addicted to alcohol. It was doomed that when Halliday stepped into the social discipline space, he was out of tune with other so-called normal children. He became a child who was separated from others and needed to be isolated from others. A pair of invisible eyes were watching him all the time, making him live in fear all his life. As Halliday said at the end of the novel, “The reason why I created the oasis is that I never felt at home in reality, and I don't know how to communicate with others. I was trapped in fear all my life, and I didn't realize until the end of my life that even though the reality was terrible and painful, it was the only place where we could get real happiness, because that was the truth”. (Cline, 2012) [4] Like the dog that escaped from prison described by Foucault in “The Force of Flight”, Halliday jumped from the prison of the real world to the oasis of the metaverse, trying to pull others out of the prejudice of discipline. (Foucault, 1973) [5] Because discipline needs to bind people in the space according to the standard of unified planning, it will inevitably lead to that in the space, the non-planned standard cannot become the judgment standard, and prejudice will also arise. “Dungeon & Dragons” is Halliday’s favorite game, which is mentioned for many times in novel. This game hides the key to enter Castle Anorak. The relationship between dungeon and castle is a metaphor of metaverse. At first, people think metaverse is a new castle which can help them escape from reality, but actually it's a dungeon of reality. “The ultimate irony in Cline’s OASIS utopia is that its programmer, James Halliday, views his VR creation not with pride or veneration (as many “gunters” would) but with a degree of skepticism, even scorn.” (Nordstrom, 2016) [6]

Halliday finally found that “Oasis” is still unable to help people get rid of the discipline of the real society, and he is just more willing to accept the discipline of code. His avatar, Anorak, is a god-level monitoring institution that fully conforms to the space discipline criteria. But Back in the real world, according to the discipline criteria of the real world, Halliday himself is just a psychopath who is determined by psychologists to have Asperger's syndrome or other more serious autism after death. “The madman is excluded from the solemnity as one of the irrational, and he is no longer recognized as the subject”. (Tian, 2022) [7] “Oasis” relies on the flesh, and people retains the thinking habits and living habits of the real society when entering it. So that the history of discipline reappears in the meta-space. Although Halliday realizes that he couldn’t eliminate the “power domination technology” in the meta-space, he still chose to stay in the meta-space completely, continue his life as his avatar “Anorak”, accept the code discipline, and bind himself in

the “Information Cocoons”, which means that he lost the opportunity to return to reality and conduct self-governance. Dianna Taylor (2010) thinks that Foucault believes that only “self-governance” can promote the birth of a new and liberating subject. This process is both “self-disclosure” and “self-destruction”. [8] Halliday could not summon the courage to make such “self-renunciation” before he died, and he could not open his heart to Morrow and confess his love for Kira. Even if he perfectly recreated his childhood hometown Middleton in the “Oasis”, he could not return to reality and face his painful childhood. After his death, he took advantage of digital privileges and handed the task to those players who escaped from reality and came to the “oasis”. Next, the author will concretely analyze Halliday's discipline strategy hidden in the code and how he completed self-governance practice with the help of “Easter Egg competition”. “In Foucault's view, public life cannot be separated from the carrier of space. Similarly, the operation of power cannot be separated from the basis of space”. (Yu, 2014) [9] Halliday used code to build a meta-space with public service functions, providing preconditions for the operation of code power. He himself became the most advanced “hierarchical monitoring” at the beginning of this space, and also had corresponding digital privileges. Morrow and Halliday jointly created the “oasis” world. He also has digital privileges and acts as a hierarchical monitoring agency. Morrow admitted in the novel: “Prior to the original launch of the OASIS, when Jim and I created our avatars, we gave ourselves superuser access to the entire simulation.” (Cline, 2012) [4] In *the Order of Discourse*, Foucault pointed out that in every society, the production of discourse is controlled, selected, combined and redistributed by a certain number of procedures at the same time. (Foucault, 1981) [10] Halliday, the main producer of the “oasis” meta-space, has the greatest discourse coding power as a special intellectual. Halliday added a reward system involving a huge amount of property in his last words, so that once people enter the “oasis” space, they will unconsciously follow the rules of “Easter Egg competition” under the drive of the profit-seeking mechanism and the influence of digital capital. The diary collection “Anorak’s Almanac”, which contains hundreds of logs of Halliday, also becomes the bible of “oasis” players and their truth. Based on Halliday's preference, people began to be crazy about the culture of the 1980s. Behind the nostalgic culture is actually the discourse discipline of digital privilege. Personal preference is subject to the “Halliday’s truth standard” under the discourse of code discipline.

The “scoreboard” is a very important tool in the process of “Easter Egg competition”, a clue that runs through the novel, and also a tool for Halliday to implement “standardized adjudication”. The emergence of the “scoreboard” enables players to quantify their own subjects with the integral data, take the integral as the reference object between themselves and others. From then on, they begin to compare, differentiate, exclude and assimilate with others according to the integral scores. In this process, the subjects are gradually dominated by the integral data, and become more easily controlled and edited under pressure. When Wade became the top five on the scoreboard, he received a private invitation to Morrow's birthday party, which was a hint that he met the access criteria of the “oasis” space. However, when Wade's avatar Parzival has not yet appeared on the scoreboard and his “oasis experience points” are meager, he can't go anywhere, but only on the planet of Ludus. Meta-space does not allow everyone to start over equally. The founder has become a rule maker since the beginning of its creation, and the rest can only seek freedom within the rules. Halliday set up a program: the top ten of the score board must be displayed in people's sight. “The full ramifications of the Scoreboard's existence occurred to me for the first time. From here on out, it would not only allow gunters to keep track of each other's progress, it would also show the entire world who the current frontrunners were, creating instant celebrities (and targets) in the process” (Cline, 2012) [4] The people on the scoreboard cannot know the points of the people outside the scoreboard, while the people outside the scoreboard can monitor the data subjects on the scoreboard, which is a one-way stare at the “data subjects”, There is a threat to the subject to be stared at in the gaze. This threat has dual nature, which can not only endow the subject with influence, but also control the subject. That is one of the privilege possessed by digital capitalists. In the novel, Wade's avatar Parzival is playing the last game, and the live video of the game appears at the top of scoreboard. When Wade successfully finished the game, he disappeared from people's sight. He

was sure that Halliday added a special code to block all communication links between him and the outside world. Using code, social media and other tools to manipulate gaze is also a way for digital capitalists to conduct discipline. For example, Facebook, Twitter, INS and other online social media companies have banned the account of Trump, the former president of the United States, until 2023. At this point, Trump has disappeared in a specific social space, disappeared in the sight of people in a specific social space, and digital capital has also reached the discipline and punishment of Trump. Generally speaking, under the pressure of discipline, “Oasis” players have also reopened the exploration of Halliday's personal life and growth experience, which is the effect Halliday hopes to achieve.

2.2. Power Discipline of IOI to Cultivate Homo Economicus

As a novel, *Ready Player One* creates a typical economic man image in the meta-space -- Nolan Sorrento by strengthening and amplifying the exploitative behavior of the digital bourgeoisie in reality. The economic man is a concept originated from *The Wealth of Nation*. It is hypothetically assumed that all the starting points of a person's thought and behavior are completely in line with the principle of rationality and only aim at the maximization of material interests. In the novel, Sorrento who had a PhD in Computer Science, once was a game designer, and now is the business director of IOI Network Service Supply Company, responsible for the acquisition of GSS, a social simulation system development company. In order to win the “Easter Egg race” and complete the acquisition task, Sorrento did not hesitate to extend the war that should have only occurred in the virtual space to the real world. He tried to kill Wade and Sorrento in the real world. Sorrento has become an agent machine for IOI enterprises to carry out power exploitation, and has become a part of the discipline process. However, the superior organization that directed Sorrento's action did not appear in the novel. They acted as the power center of IOI Company in the form of being absent, and manipulated the hunting action of the whole enterprise behind the scenes.

When Wade and Sorrento negotiated for the first time, Wade pretended to ask for Sorrento's position and consulted with the surveillance camera. Obviously, he has realized that the power center of IOI enterprise is not at the scene of the negotiation meeting. Sorrento is just a substitute machine that has fully accepted the capital regulation training. The real power center of this enterprise is hidden at the other end of the monitor, supervising everything. Foucault's disciplinary system is widely used in all fields of society. The author believes that although the term “discipline” implies the power relationship between taming and being tamed, discipline is not directly equivalent to exploitation, and the role of discipline should be viewed dialectically. In the novel, IOI Company uses discipline to occupy the vitality of labor force excessively, which, in my opinion, constitutes discipline in the sense of exploitation. In modern society, with the development of science and technology, more and more machines and robots have replaced the role of the original labor force. Capital power can no longer simply satisfy the need to occupy the body of the labor force and let the physical life perform mechanical labor as before. Their demand for the vitality of the labor force is increasing. “Vitality is the ability of 'life' to produce direct value and unrealistic potential value in the process of labour”. (Shi, 2021) [11] Vitality takes physical life as its carrier, while discipline provides a link from physical life to vitality for capital. Sorrento has become a homo economics rather than an individual under the discipline of IOI, which ensures him to offer vitality for IOI actively. “Homo economicus is an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself.” (Foucault, 2008:226) [12] In the novel, Sorrento participated in the “Easter Egg race” in the name of IOI enterprises and took a series of extreme market spontaneous actions in order to win the GSS equity. Under the governance skills of IOI enterprises, Sorrento has become the person of enterprises who are subject to the rules of “competitive dynamic society”. On the surface, Sorrento is acting in his own interests and seeking to maximize his own interests; In fact, unconsciously, he has assumed the interests of IOI enterprises and internalized the interests of enterprises into a part of his own interests.

Wade believes that IOI has changed the nature of the game from an individual or team based electronic game competition to a spontaneous market resource competition by hiring the “Sixers”. Just as Sorrento faced Wade's question that they shouldn't have killed for a game, he answered,

“There are billions of dollars at stake here, along with control of one of the world's most profitable corporations, and of the OASIS itself. This is much more than a videogame contest. It always has been.” (Cline, 2012) [4] Chen Peiyong pointed out in *Foucault's Biopolitical Guide* that “Modern society is not like what modernity promises that people are free enough to control their bodies. Human bodies do not belong to people. They are constantly disciplined to better serve the operation of power and the production of capital. This is the other side of modern society.” (Chen, 2017) [13]

The first training step for IOI to create production people is to “distinguish”, which distinguishes individuals from natural persons as debtors. Since then, the individual's identity as a natural person has been deprived, and he has been forced to accept market discipline as a debtor, that is, the “contract worker” in the novel. The “hierarchical monitoring” organization established by IOI to implement this step is the “the Credit and Collections division”. The “clipboard” acts as a monitor here, exposing people's financial situation to the supervision of capital power in a one-way way. In the novel, the staff of the credit department “consulted his clipboard” and said to Wade's fake identity, Mr. Lynch, “you have failed to make the last three payments on your IOI Visa card, which has an outstanding balance in excess of twenty thousand dollars. Our records also show that you are currently unemployed and have therefore been classified as impecuunious.” (Cline, 2012) [4] The difference between the people who produce and the people who exchange is that they can't grasp the information with an equal attitude and demand equal value. “Indents were never able to pay off their debt and earn their release. Once you got finished slapping you with pay deductions, late fees, and interest penalties, you wound up owing them more each month, instead of less.” (Cline, 2012) [4] In fact, Sorento also played the role of a hierarchical monitoring agency among the “Sixers”. As a special intellectual, he made capital power the truth of the “Sixers”.

When Wade was forcibly taken away by IOI as a contract worker, he was asked to participate in a performance test, and according to his achievements, he was assigned to “Oasis Support Technical Service Department II”. From the perspective of Foucault's discipline theory, this process involves the second major means of discipline, “standardized adjudication”, that is, the unified planning of each space is included in the criteria, according to the individual's compliance with these criteria, people are included in different integrated spaces, and then a reward and punishment mechanism is established according to the norms of specific spaces. “People constantly compare, differentiate, arrange, assimilate and exclude in a specific space, which will make everyone face the pressure of uniformity and constantly be dominated” (Chen, 2017). [13] Next, IOI conducted the third means of discipline training for Wade, that is, inspection. Wade accepted the comprehensive inspection of IOI, and his physical condition was recorded. This step is to shape the “writing power” of IOI enterprises. When Wade's body becomes data, IOI enterprises have the editing power of Wade's body data. Under the control of “writing power”, Wade became a unified whole, an object of knowledge and truth, and IOI enterprises became editors of truth. After a series of processes, Wade's life has become visible. As a subject, “his perceptual behaviours have been digitalized and modeled, and eventually exceed the limits of human beings” (Wang & Liu, 2022). [2] The monitoring status of IOI on Wade and the enslavement status of his life force have also been determined. “The discipline power has taken advantage of people's fear of the plague, so that the discipline mechanism can be applied in modern society”. (Chen, 2017) [13] For this reason, People would rather be imprisoned in the “Panoramic building” all their lives. Wandering is also one of the “self-cultivation”. If people can't face leading a vagrant life, they can't find that part of themselves that has been taken away by the “corporate society”.

3. Conclusion and Implications

In the process of people's life in the “oasis”, there is no new way of division of labour and ownership. The people in the novel just bring the original ownership of real society to the “oasis”, and turn the real currency into the “experience points”. There is no essential reform in the social system. Although the means of production have been greatly improved due to the development of science and technology when people live in the “oasis”, people's production activities have not directly affected the reality of nature.

The “meta universe” in the context of capital is not a real utopian society, and the “meta universe” is not just a commodity, let alone a monster. We should break through the context of capital and grasp it from the reality and actual situation. The metauniverse is a collection of science and technology that may bring significant breakthroughs to human productivity. It is a tool that can help us understand the world, but it is not just understanding. The key lies in how to use it to transform the real world, improve the utilization of material means of production, coordinate the relationship between nature and human, and promote distribution fairness. To build a virtual society and live in a virtual society can only be used as a way of entertainment, not as a way to solve the real contradiction.

Acknowledgements

Phased research results of the Guangzhou education scientific research project (2019), “Research on the Informatization of Academic English under the Background of Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area” (201912091)

References

- [1] The 49th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China. 2022. CNNIC [R/DB] <http://www.199it.com/archives/1405773.html>.
- [2] Wang Xiteng, Liu Jianing. 2022. Metaspaces as a Literature Presentation[J]. *China Book Review*, 4: 17-27.
- [3] Monteith A. 2022. Transhumanism, Utopia, and the Problem of the Real in *Ready Player One* [J]. *Religion and Public Culture*, 34(1): 1-1.
- [4] Cline E. 2012. *Ready Player One*[M]. London: Arrow Books.
- [5] Foucault M. 1973. The Force of Flight [A]. In J. W. Crampton & S. Elden (eds.). *Space, Knowledge and Power: Foucault and Geography* [C]. Aldershot: Ashgate, 169-172.
- [6] Nordstrom J. 2016. “A Pleasant Place for the World to Hide”: Exploring Themes of Utopian Play in *Ready Player One* [J]. *Interdisciplinary Studies of Literature*, 18(2): 238-256.
- [7] Tian Yuyang. 2022. Foucault’s Theory of Power from the Perspective of Visual Culture [D]. Liaoning: Liaoning University.
- [8] Dianna Taylor. 2010. *Michel Foucault: Key Concepts* [M]. Trans. by Pang Hong. Chongqing: Chongqing University Press, 2020.
- [9] Yu Yida. 2014. Foucault’s Space Powers Dialectics: Context, Content and Significance [D]. Suzhou: Soochow University.
- [10] Foucault M. 1981. The Order of Discourse [A]. In R. Young (eds.). *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader* [C]. Boston: Routledge & Megan Paul, 51-78.
- [11] Shi Guangnan. 2021. The Predicament and Way Out of the Capitalization of Vitality[J]. *Zhejiang Journal*, (6):123-129.
- [12] Foucault M. 1978-1979. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France* [M]. Trans. by Graham Burchell. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.
- [13] Chen Peiyong. 2017. *Foucault's Biopolitical Mapping*[M]. Beijing: China Social Sciences Press.