Technological Euphoria and Reflection: On Several Paradoxes Beneath the Metaverse Postprint

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Abstract

The metaverse is a recently prominent and complex concept that not only concerns technological breakthroughs and capital interests, but also necessitates critical reflection on its underlying cultural issues. This article proceeds from the scenario-based experiences engendered by the metaverse to investigate its authenticity and inherent hallucinatory quality, the aura of literature and art as well as copyright issues, and how the democratization of information simultaneously impacts imagination and thinking. Can it achieve poetic dwelling in its ideal form? Is it a matter of presence or absence? Empowerment or constraint? Regardless of what form technological evolution takes, the focus should be directed toward human comprehensive development and the promotion of social integration.

Full Text

Technological Carnival and Reflection: Focusing on Several Paradoxes Under the Metaverse

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Abstract: The metaverse is a recently popularized complex concept that concerns not only technological breakthroughs and capital interests but also requires reflection on deeper cultural issues. Starting from the contextualized experiences brought by the metaverse, this paper explores the authenticity and inherent psychedelic nature of the metaverse, the aura of art and copyright issues, the impact on imagination and thinking amid information democratization, and whether it can achieve the ideal form of poetic dwelling. Are we present or absent? Is it empowerment or constraint? Regardless of technological evolution, the focus should remain on human all-round development and social integration.

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Regarding the yet-to-arrive "metaverse," Yu Guoming has offered his vision, arguing that the evolutionary logic of future media proceeds from the "Age of Context" to the "metaverse" and then to the "Mind World," thereby achieving a breakthrough in the freedom of human social practice. He contends that the metaverse represents the ultimate digital medium integrating all internet-related technologies, and that "decentralized extended reality is an important focal point for advancing metaverse construction" [1]. An industry-academia symposium on "The Meaning and Scenarios of the Metaverse from an XR Perspective" discussed hot topics including "the concept, application scenarios, and technical support of the metaverse, as well as the significant opportunities and revolutionary impacts that metaverse construction brings to media development and even human society" [2].

1. What Is the Metaverse?

The question of what exactly the "metaverse" is has not yet formed a unified definition. However, when the gaming social platform Roblox listed on the U.S. stock market in March 2021, the concept of the "metaverse" was hyped in capital markets, with major tech companies scrambling to explore this domain.

1.1 The Concept of the Metaverse

From an etymological perspective, the English expression "Metaverse" consists of two parts: "Meta" and "Verse." "Meta" means "beyond," while "Verse" derives from "Universe," a synthesis of Uni (unified) and Verse (tending toward) [3]. The metaverse envisions a transcendent state of existence toward which all humanity converges. The year 2021 has been called the "first year of the metaverse." In Neal Stephenson' s sci-fi novel *Snow Crash*, a digital virtual world parallel to the real world is depicted, where all real people possess two bodies simultaneously: their physical body and their digital avatar in the "Metaverse." The protagonist, Hiro, can see scenes almost identical to the real world by wearing goggles—scenes that "can be seen by the eyes, can be zoomed in, inverted. They don' t really exist." The creators of these highly realistic virtual scenes are the ninja-level overlords of the Association for Computing Machinery' s Global Multimedia Protocol Group. These data-constructed worlds differ from the real world only in that "they don' t really exist. They are merely software, available to the public through fiber optic networks spanning the globe" [4].

1.2 Current Application Status of the Metaverse Concept

Microsoft has proposed the Enterprise Metaverse, planning to achieve it through a series of new applications that integrate virtual environments. Zuckerberg renamed Facebook to Meta, announcing the establishment of a metaverse product team under the VR Labs division to focus on building the metaverse ecosystem. Apple and Google have also frequently laid out VR/AR strategies. Domestic companies such as Tencent, ByteDance, NetEase, Lilith, MiHoYo, and Zhongqingbao are all involved in metaverse construction. Roblox CEO Baszucki points out that becoming a metaverse must satisfy at least eight characteristics: Identity, Friends, Immersive, Low Friction, Variety, Anywhere, Economy, and Civility [5]. In other words, people can experience immersive social interaction with low latency through virtual identities without spatiotemporal constraints, while the diversified content and excellent economic system in the metaverse ensure that people can live long-term in the "metaverse" and improve and create digital civilization.

In short, the metaverse is "the future integrated form of all internet elements, including internet, virtual reality, immersive experience, blockchain, industrial internet, cloud computing, and digital twin technology, also known as 'shared virtual reality internet' and 'omniscient internet' "[6]. It belongs to no individual or company; anyone can enter the metaverse through any device and change the content of this universe, rather than simply observing it. People exist in a well-equipped virtual digital world where they can fully realize personal and social needs such as identity recognition, currency transactions, and social belonging, just as in the physical world.

2. What Will Contextualized Experience Create?

Robert Scoble and Shel Israel developed the concept of "context" in *The Age of Context*. They argue that context generates a "sense of presence" driven by mobile terminals, sensors, social media, big data, and positioning systems. People can shuttle between different reality and metaverse-fused contextual spaces to pursue hyper-real immediate experiences, compensating for the enormous tension between the restricted body and mobile visual perception in the metaverse.

2.1 Reality and Illusion

Anne Friedberg points out: "The limits and diversity of our visual frameworks determine the boundaries and diversity of our world" [7]. Realistic contextualized experiences avoid deviations in understanding the full picture of real events caused by the complexity of remote sensing, potentially reducing the possibility of being "deceived" by data, algorithms, programs, vocabulary, presentation methods, images, and montage. As an organic integration of technologies, the metaverse mostly presents idealized forms. Its internal economic system and basic rules, even the metaverse itself, become events with internal logic or interpretable narrative texts. Its complex, immersive carnival experiences greatly

increase the difficulty of understanding the essence of the metaverse. Gilles Deleuze argues that "by thoroughly eliminating the traditional distinction between virtual and real, there is a way to understand this dynamic that can resonate with people" [8]. Reality and virtuality become interrelated at an internal level, flattening into a uniform consistency. Virtual experiences that cannot distinguish authenticity and the rapid spread of contradictory, unverifiable information create a complex field of perception and memory that dazzles and confuses.

2.2 Aura of Art and Copyright

From the print literature form in the age of mechanical reproduction to the visual film and television literature form, and then to the new media literature under internet technology that integrates multimedia symbols, the pattern of contemporary Chinese literature has been reconstructed. This "vertically presents the close relationship between literary evolution and media technology innovation, while horizontally demonstrating the respective characteristics of different media literary forms, the law of diversified literary development, and the coexistence and integration of different media literary forms, also proving the rationality and inevitability of new media literature generation" [9]. The four elements of literary criticism are the artist, the work, the world, and the audience [10]. Changes in any dimension will impact literary development. With technological progress, will AI writing with greater artistic creativity emerge? How will avant-garde artists integrate technology and art to create richer artistic forms? What new artistic styles will new media forms catalyze? How specifically will innovation occur?

Walter Benjamin believed that the "aura" of original works disappeared with the arrival of the age of mechanical reproduction, rendering the distinction between "original" and "copy" invalid and making authenticity criteria inapplicable. The "aura,"as the final guardian of art, "trains the senses, bringing people directly into past memories, immersing them in its atmosphere. Simultaneously, the 'aura' endows an object with the ability to 'look back,' becoming an inexhaustible source of appreciation for artworks" and "displays a natural, non-alienated relationship between humans and objects" [11]. Therefore, it should not be destroyed but preserved. The internet era faces high costs for combating piracy and great difficulty in protecting digital art copyrights. In the metaverse, NFT utilizes blockchain technology to permanently bind digital assets with creators, making copyright ownership transparent in digital wallets. This greatly stimulates creative enthusiasm, and "content will present a more diversified and high-quality trend, with value-oriented content production based on user needs becoming an innovation focus in the media field" [12]. The "aura" of original works reappears with the uniqueness and non-reproducibility of creation, representing respect for artists' creative achievements. However, after solving traditional copyright confirmation problems, new copyright issues emerge, such as: "Who holds the minting right of NFTs, and how are rights arranged between copyright holders

and authorized persons?" and "How can rights holders protect their rights and obtain what belongs to them?" [13].

3. Information Democratization and Crisis of Thinking

The popularization of the internet has brought entirely new living spaces and convenient, fast recording capabilities, while simultaneously facing numerous confusions, disturbances, and chaos: difficulty concentrating, labeling of memory, false information, and scarcity of imagination.

3.1 Information Democratization

From the perspective of memory carriers' impact, the social mainstream values of the oral, pre-literate era were least susceptible to challenge. In the era where written text recorded social norms, writing was regarded as inscription in the sense of carving and permanence, establishing the tradition of "writing carries the Dao" and reverence for written characters. The continuous development of big data and cloud computing technology enables the explosive transmission of large amounts of perceptible and visible information without delay, "destroying the sense of social space long created by print media. Print media' s representation of the world must be mediated through language, creating social situational divisions between the literate and illiterate, between those with certain reading interests and those without. This results in media space shaping the imagination of reality among children and adults, men and women, elites and masses, whites and blacks" [14]. The convenience of information acquisition and the virtual, open nature of network society give grassroots groups more opportunities to speak. Ordinary people transform from single-dimensional readers and audiences to writers, directors, artists, information publishers, and communication participants. Regardless of gender, race, age, class, or identity, everyone can speak freely on internet platforms. The era of cacophony has arrived. While short video platforms like TikTok and Bilibili, along with youth subcultures, rise rapidly, expressions of patriotism present a decentralized, informal, grassroots form distinct from mainstream media norms—using exaggerated and spoofed emojis to replace single slogans, employing warmer, more down-to-earth terms like "Brother China" and "Little Pink" to concretize and approximate national image, and expressing deep love for the motherland through new methods of banter and irony.

The progress of information technology rapidly spreads creative, entertaining expressions to every corner, enabling group members to share information and "permanently preserve and accurately record the occurrence time and transmission path of information" [15], unrestricted by time or space. Users and media form a relationship of mutual domestication: users receive information in networks to form an imaginative relationship with the world, while simultaneously endowing media with new meaning, creating a decentralized communication mechanism that transcends time, space, geography, and culture.

3.2 Crisis of Deep Thinking

Nicholas Negroponte noted in *Being Digital*: "The expressive power of multimedia is too specific, making it increasingly difficult to find space for imagination to roam. Conversely, text can stimulate imagery and metaphor, enabling readers to derive rich meaning from imagination and experience. When reading a novel, you give it sound, color, and dynamism" [16]. The metaphor and sanctity of text disappear in the "byte" memory era of computer information technology. While recording becomes convenient, the space for imagination becomes cramped.

Human progress and development rely on establishing a "cultural space" based on recollection and reflection to determine value benchmarks and plan social development directions. In the digital era, the infinite amount of information conflicts sharply with human time and limited attention. Multitasking scatters human attention, which first impacts deep thinking ability. Human memory becomes increasingly brief and irrelevant due to "cloud"substitution, with in-depth thinking and abstract analysis replaced by more superficial, fragmented, intuitive, and perceptible shallow memory. Commercial interests and eye-catching appeal become the main demands of internet influencers and traffic stars. Hot news events become popular quickly and cool down rapidly, making memory brief and disordered. People remain busy and anxious when processing information, but this has no significance for deep thinking.

4. Poetic Dwelling?

Heidegger believed that the subject-object dichotomy made humans ruled by science and technology, "losing complete humanity and becoming commodities and tools." Art, due to its non-utilitarian nature, became Heidegger' s prescription for saving modern society. While opposing technology and art is clearly unreasonable, Heidegger' s pointed questions remain valuable—returning to an authentic state, "listening to the call of Being," and through laborious free creation enriching and prospering the world to "enable natural, free, and harmonious development of life" [17].

4.1 Presence and Absence

The metaverse creates a digital "identity" that can be freely chosen, replicating key elements of real social relationships into the virtual world and breaking spatiotemporal constraints on identity, age, occupation, and gender. Social interaction in the metaverse is rich and diverse, serving as a "mirror" of real social fields. Through virtual technology entering immersive social scenarios, people are liberated from "thumb" interaction, with tactile experiences converted into diverse unity of various senses. Once bodily absence transforms into communicative presence, people shift from passive bystanders to active participants, no longer observing the entire social process from the outside, thus creating more opportunities to establish relationships with others and easily forming di-

verse, lasting social relationship chains to obtain immersive experiences in new social scenarios. Its realism effectively compensates for the absence of physical bodies, creating a sense of realistic presence and crafting a quasi-experience that can even surpass real-world experiences. Such social interaction based on bodily sensory presence eliminates the boundary between virtual and real space, satisfying people' s expectations for emotional communication.

However, while the metaverse eliminates temporal and spatial boundaries, it may simultaneously create new barriers. In the metaverse, differences in human experience transform into differences in equipment rather than human differences—the quality of equipment determines the experience in the metaverse. For VR and related products to become high-penetration consumer electronics like mobile phones, they must feature low cost, practicality, and necessity [18]. By 2050, China "will be the country with the largest elderly population in the world" [19]. For digital refugee groups such as those born in the 1940s and 1950s and even older, the speed of information and technology iteration far exceeds their ability to accept and understand information. Advanced technology primarily serves elites and youth groups with higher consumption power, while the elderly become transparent people in the information age and are gradually marginalized. As an integration of numerous technologies, the metaverse should also consider these "silent majorities," giving them more attention and creating a barrier-free, non-exclusive metaverse landscape that satisfies all social members.

4.2 Empowerment and Constraint

In the metaverse era, is this the progress or crisis of human civilization? Have people become more free? As an unknown field, what form the metaverse will ultimately be constructed and developed into remains unknown. On one hand, the metaverse' s high synchronization with reality and ultra-high fidelity reduces restrictions on people by geographical, physiological, and other real factors, enabling them to gamify attempts through their own imagination and satisfying great spiritual freedom. Technology can be used to predict outcomes of behaviors with high practice costs and conduct vocational training under simulation conditions, thereby saving costs. On the other hand, maintaining metaverse development requires VR/AR, computing power, big data, content IP, digital twins, blockchain, integrated circuits, communication components, new display systems, mixed reality devices, precision freeform optics, high-pixel high-definition cameras, and other network technologies, as well as physical resources like electricity and energy support. It has a material aspect and exerts bidirectional influence with real life—while people' s lives are changed, it also brings real-world impacts such as increased carbon emissions.

The metaverse is an immersive virtual digital platform co-created by PGC and UGC, with its basic economic form being conceptual economy and virtual currency. When users engage in cultural creation, emotional expression, social establishment, and identity seeking on metaverse platforms, "moved by emotion and expressed in words," this represents the display of individual personality

and embodies the process of human essential power objectification. This process greatly liberates human subjectivity and satisfies human spiritual freedom, sharing intrinsic consistency with Kant' s view that early art originated from human play impulse. However, immersive virtual experiences in the metaverse easily bring addiction risks— "superficially enjoying free entertainment, but actually producing content for internet platforms for free, engaging in unpaid or extremely asymmetrical digital labor between gains and 付出" [20]. All user production constitutes free labor and emotional labor, representing covert exploitation by capital forces that implicitly control people' s behavior. Users are not formally employed by media capital, yet they must use terminals or devices as production tools anytime and anywhere to produce immaterial content and service products for digital capital, with their achievements being 无偿攫取 by media capital or technology designers as sources of surplus value. The freedom users obtain is merely freedom dancing in shackles under the dominance of the capital environment.

In the media age, more worthy memories need to be selected and maintained. Engels long ago pointed out: "Every step forward in culture is a step toward freedom" [21]. If the meaning and purpose of technological development disappear, then wandering in civilization becomes like wandering among ruins and remains. The core goal of emerging technology "should be to enable people to obtain a sound information environment and social environment, providing better 铺垫 for human free and balanced development" [22].

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Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.