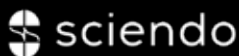


In Focus

# Can We *Really* Have Nice Things? Preparing for the Metaverse



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## ABSTRACT

**Drawing from our previous experience of the virtual world Second Life, we engage in a critical reading of the hype and promotion of the Metaverse in Mark Zuckerberg's 2021 Keynote Presentation (Meta 2021). We zoom in on the visions of the reality and of the future that big tech leaders promise to legitimize themselves as not only economically but socially and morally valuable. Presented with the help of three broad themes – connection, experiences, and creativity – the promises of a better future articulated in the descriptions and visions of the Metaverse are anchored in a deterministic narrative of technology as an enabler of individual choice and freedom. In this way, the commercial intent behind the world-building actions of a mighty economic actor becomes reframed as merely an expression of users own needs and dreams of a better future.**

In this essay, we offer a critical reading of the Keynote Presentation, *The Metaverse and How We'll Build It Together* (Meta 2021). Our perspectives are informed by our experiences and observations of social media technologies and online environments as users, students, researchers, and educators who have been working in the field since the early days of Web 2.0. In particular, we are influenced and inspired by a small-scale research study we conducted in the environment Second Life (Dumitrica, Gaden 2008; Gaden, Dumitrica 2010).

Second Life (SL) came to our attention at a time when Web 2.0 – and its related buzzwords and values, i.e., participation, convergence, networks, and connection and sharing (Burgess, Green 2009; Castells 1996; John 2022; Jenkins 2006; Rider Murakami Woord 2019; van Dijck 2013) – was still relatively new and unmonetized. To us, Linden Lab was, at the time, a rather faceless tech-company and we only learned about their product via a keynote speech at an academic conference (Lester 2007). In addition to the networking and educational

benefits of this virtual world that the Keynote Presentation advertised, our attention was caught by promises of creative self-expression and boundary-pushing possibility. In SL, we learned that one could be whomever one wanted to – and the prospect was intriguing. If the virtual world was a blank canvas for people like us to populate with our creations, was it also devoid of questions of power?

The world, it turned out, was not as blank of a canvas as we believed and we were not equipped to be its artists. In particular, we approached these promises of freedom of expression and interaction through the lens of gender, imagining SL as “a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves” (Haraway 1991: 181). Focusing on how we encountered and imported discourses around gender to this space that we were enticed to creatively appropriate (Dumitrica, Gaden 2008; Gaden, Dumitrica 2010) led us to three findings: the world was hypersexualized, it was intensely commercialized, and we felt

lost and unsure in it. Even though building in SL was advertised as easy, thanks to the user-friendly infrastructure that promised to translate coding skills into a simple click-and-use drop-down menu of building choices, in practice, we struggled. The choices reflected traditional binary stereotypes, and we lacked the skill to customize our looks effectively. The highly customized, animated styles we admired on other avatars cost money, and the sexualized body parts advertised on huge billboards contributed to a sexualized environment that was reinforced by some of our first explorations in SL (Dumitrica, Gaden 2008; Gaden, Dumitrica 2010).

As we listen to the hype and promotion of the Metaverse, we are reminded of not only our experience of SL, but also of the necessity of paying close attention to the visions (of reality and of the future) that tech leaders promise. Unlike our work in SL, this essay is not yet an empirical or experiential study of Meta's environment. The critical questioning of this vision that we begin to offer here is part of larger intellectual efforts to think about how for-profit actors present themselves as socially valuable and responsible, and also to highlight how "overarching public discourses on the future [...] are heavily influenced by major corporations [...] and thus seem increasingly 'corporatized'" (Urry 2016: 11 in Haupt 2021: 238). More so than 15 years ago, when our SL study was done, "digital discourses" are naturalizing technology as a response to "individualism, authenticity, creativity, personal expression, and so forth" (Fisher 2010: 244) while effacing the continuous and aggressive commercialization driving its development. Facebook/Meta remains, of course, in the thick of the action, sitting on a notorious trove of user data and array of digital services and technologies that could reasonably grant it a monopoly in the platformization of the Web (Nieborg, Helmond 2019).

From this vantage point, we engage in a critical reading of Meta's Keynote Presentation (Meta 2021). Building on the legacy of critical theory, our reading remained pur-

posefully "suspicious of the very categories of better, useful, appropriate, productive, and valuable, as these are understood in the present order" (Horkheimer 1972: 207 in Kellner 1990: 22) and oriented toward uncovering the relation between text and the legitimation of power structures. To remain mindful of the possibility for multiple and diverse interpretations, our essay draws not just from our own readings but also from discussions with our undergraduate student research assistant. We embarked upon this critical reading of the Keynote by individually watching and taking notes about its main ideas and buzzwords, then discussed our notes with each other. In addition to providing notes on Meta's Keynote, our undergraduate assistant also reflected on our earlier research on Second Life and the current iteration of Second Life. In particular, their first reading of the Keynote focused more on the possibilities of new experiences and on immersion (particularly for gameplay), building-up their expectation of a science-fiction future come true. In this process, having some insight in to their perspective sensitized us of the persuasive force of the promise of a techno-future to come.

Following our individual readings, discussions, and re-readings, we identified several themes signaled by different recurring keywords or ideas in the Keynote. And while our goal was not to formally flag or count frequencies, these themes allowed us to systematically subject the Keynote to the following questions: What kind of values are being associated with this environment and technology, and, what kind of promises are being made about it? In the next sections, we look into these questions in more depth across the three very broad themes emerging from the Keynote: connection, experience, and creativity.

### THE METAVERSE VISION

The Keynote video, *The Metaverse and How We'll Build it Together* (Meta 2021), is 77 minutes long, and divided into 13 segments. The Keynote is led by Facebook/Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg and features

various leaders and experts from within Meta. Although the speakers describe the existing technology, they also articulate a vision for future developments. Throughout the Keynote, the boundary between what is now and what will be becomes increasingly fuzzy. The first few minutes of the Keynote aptly capture this: as Zuckerberg invites us to “imagine you put on your glasses or headset, and you’re instantly in your home space” (02:59). At the same time, the visuals often make it hard for us to grasp whether we are witnessing an already existing environment, such as Horizon Worlds, or a rendering of things to come (the dialogue informs us that the visuals were designed by an otherwise unnamed creator in Los Angeles).

What is clear (yet perhaps unsurprising given the promotional function of the Keynote) is the desirability of this vision we are presented with. We are invited to share in the excitement of Zuckerberg and his colleagues, as well as their confidence that technology can bring it all to fruition. There’s an inevitability to it all – that this *will* be and that we *will* experience it in the way that it is articulated by the speakers:

“The next platform and medium will be even more immersive, an embodied internet where you’re in the experience, not just looking at it [...]. We’ll be able to feel present like we’re right here with the people no matter how far apart we actually are. We’ll be able to express ourselves in new, joyful, completely immersive ways [...]” (01:08).

The future that we are invited to imagine and participate in is formed from the eight building blocks of the Metaverse: the feeling of presence, avatars, home spaces, teleporting, interoperability, privacy and safety, virtual goods, and natural interfaces (Meta 2021).

In this discussion, we unpack the Keynote’s ideological work by focusing on the values it associates with technology

and the promises made about it across the three themes that we identified during our individual readings and shared discussions: *connection*, *experiences*, and *creativity*.

These themes guide us on how we can think through the ways in which this environment and our (potential) participation in it are articulated in the Keynote Presentation. We conclude by considering how these observations relate to our findings in our study of SL, particularly the tension we experienced between the promises of creativity and autonomy and the recognition that this is realized within the structures and strictures of the platform.

### Connection

At the beginning of the Keynote, Zuckerberg identifies “connecting with people” as the “most important [experience] of all” (03:40). Language such as “together”, “connection”, and “we” is prevalent in all three main social areas – home, work, and play. From sharing pet videos over social media to participating in work meetings in the Metaverse, connection with others is prioritized as an overarching value of the environment.

In the first part of the Keynote, these “others” are primarily friends and family doing things together in the Metaverse. No longer limited by small living spaces, shabby furniture, or lack of money to travel somewhere nice, friends and family are promised quality time together in an environment that is never untidy, boring, or perilous. Technology offers visually appealing spaces for interaction with loved ones, while this interaction is presented as both possible and desirable (in the Metaverse, everyone has loving and cheerful friends, family, and colleagues).

In the second part of the Keynote, connection remains implied in the promises of the Metaverse as a facilitator of professional collaboration and of participation in the (Metaverse) economy. Here, connection has a monetary and even an ethical value: Horizon Workrooms, the upgraded version of the pandemic’s remote working ethos, are described as “spreading opportunity to more people” and enabling workers to

better use their work time, as they will spend “less time stuck in traffic, more time doing things that matter – and it will be good for the environment” (30:00). Furthermore, new opportunities to earn money will grow out of the promised economy of the Metaverse, where people will be able to sell digital and non-digital creations to one another.

## Experiences

Whereas connection is about being together with others, it is the experiences – as in, an embodied feeling of the Metaverse – that promise to make connections authentic and even better than unmediated ones. The Keynote audience is introduced to the expectation of Metaverse experiences that will be multi-sensory, immersive, and *feel real*. As Zuckerberg explains, the “feeling of presence” is “the defining quality of the Metaverse...You’re going to really feel like you’re there with other people” (06:16). This brings us “back again to connections”, as the Keynote puts it, and we are led to understand the intrinsic value of experiences as the stepping stone to fulfilling social connections.

While technological innovation and integration promise a “realistic presence” (45:55), they are also generating new – presumably out of reach or even un-imaginable just yet – experiences. Technological complexity, it turns out, may be even better than our human bodies at conveying new experiences: “You can start to see how the Metaverse is going to enable richer experiences, by letting us add new layers to the world that we can interact with” (14:40). This interweaving of physicality and virtual/augmented reality thus promises to enable an enhanced experience of the world. The director of Facebook Reality Labs, featured as a guest speaker in the Keynote, explains that augmented reality creates experiences “that empower people to be more connected and at the same time more present with the world around them” (49:02), promising that the tools they develop will “democratize AR [augmented reality] creation” (49:17).

Within this discussion of experiences, special attention is devoted to gaming.

Indeed, immersion has become central to gameplay – and the promise that “maybe you’ll do things that aren’t even possible in gaming today” (17:17) is stoking the hunger for more and more realistic experiences. Gaming, Zuckerberg admits, is “how a lot of people will step into the Metaverse for the first time” (18:10). Promises of feeling like “you’re right in the room together, making eye contact, having a shared sense of space, and not just looking at a grid of faces on a screen” (02:20) aside, gaming takes the front seat when it comes to “experiences” that “feel real”. Zuckerberg announces:

“A lot of the most interesting games out there take advantage of how you can move around physically. Being able to look anywhere, move freely. It’s just a fundamentally different experience from staring at a screen. This quality of being physically embodied and able to interact with the world and move around inside it. Now that opens up some completely new experiences [...]” (23:25).

Importantly, though, such embodied experiences in the Metaverse are possible thanks to a seamless integration and interaction with technology. The Keynote announces, “new ways of interacting with devices that are much more natural”; in turn, “[y]our devices won’t be the focal points of your attention anymore” (09:54). In this way, technology is both brought into focus and hidden away: interacting with the technology becomes part of the experiences (and the value of the experiences) themselves, while at the same time it slips away from sight and awareness. In turn, the interoperability of devices and apps appears to be merely the conduit to full immersion. Zuckerberg explains that the Metaverse will enable you to send a text on your mobile *just by thinking about* moving your fingers. The seamless integration of technology will allow users to have (and to amass) “new

experiences”, such as attending a concert and an afterparty with a friend who lives across the world (12:55). In this way, the familiarity of embodied experiences is transposed into the virtual environment, while complex technological solutions become *a necessity* of the experience itself.

As with connection, there is a low-key yet pervasive assumption of commercialization in the discourses of experiences. For example, after attending a concert with your friends in the Metaverse, you can “connect with other fans, hear new versions of your favorite songs, and check out the merch that just dropped” at the afterparty (14:25). In the background, we see avatars trying on concert merch and interacting with the artist (Jon Batiste) whose concert they just attended. Zuckerberg intones “you can start to see how the Metaverse is going to enable richer experiences, by letting us add new layers to the world that we can interact with. Creators and artists are going to be able to connect to their audience in new ways, and really bring them into these shared experiences” (14:40). Consumption and commercial activity are normalized as integral and beneficial parts of these experiences.

### **Creativity**

An emphasis on creativity and in particular on the participant as an empowered creator underpins the persuasive edifice of the Keynote. We are interpellated as creative collaborators and encouraged to believe that, in the Metaverse, we can “do almost anything you can imagine” (01:19) and, furthermore, that we can both benefit from the work of other “creators” and even think of making a good living by building (in) the Metaverse.

In the Keynote video, speakers consistently emphasize the importance of creative production, individuals as creators, and economic benefits. Creators and creative work can take many forms: “there will be many different kinds of creators in the Metaverse. Creators who make digital objects, creators who offer services and experiences, and those who build entire

worlds like game creators do today” (38:35), and the Metaverse is articulated as an inclusive space, populated by “creators from all walks of life” (51:06). The promise of inclusivity in the Metaverse is also signaled visually through racially and gender diverse avatars and guest speakers.

The technological infrastructure that Meta has developed/is working on developing is, however, what enables the transition from a user to a creator. Zuckerberg outlines how Meta is setting aside \$150 million to “train the next generation of creators” who will “benefit from it because you will build it” (and, in the process, also generate revenues for themselves). Users will be able to train (there is a professional curriculum and certification in the works (33:40)), then build the Metaverse. Creators working in existing online spaces can also learn how to expand their success in the Metaverse. We meet a creator in the Keynote (introduced as a “beauty creator who launched her own lifestyle brand on Instagram” (39:54)). This influencer is being told about all the amazing things that she will be able to do in the Metaverse, like “Imagine for your biggest fans, you could have an exclusive party where anyone could visit, no matter where they were in the world” (42:22) and “you could also drop an exclusive product in the Metaverse, where it will be available only to your most ardent fans who pay for special access to get that product” (43:08).

Creativity is thus something between a prerequisite and a product of participating in the Metaverse. It’s also clearly linked to economic production. In the following discussion, we think through what is accomplished ideologically through the articulation of these values in the Keynote video presentation.

### **DISCUSSION**

Reminiscent of Smythe’s (2006) description of advertising as not so much selling a product, but rather creating a need that one didn’t know they have; Zuckerberg’s Keynote firmly orients audiences toward the future and promises that the Metaverse will enable and address their need for connection,

creativity, and experiences. Echoing the larger connectionist discourse generated by contemporary network capitalism (Rider, Murakami Wood 2019), the Keynote positions a vision of the Metaverse as merely a response to users' innate desire for connection, enhanced experiences, and creativity. When we explored SL, we found that our experiences were not at all what we had expected based on the rhetoric we had encountered in Lester's Keynote (Lester 2007). Our experiences were not going to be the same as all other users' experiences either: they were formed and interpreted through our own situated perspectives. In the vision of the mediated future presented in Meta's Keynote, whose needs are actually being reflected?

While the brandification of the self and the monetization of personal life experiences on social media platforms are familiar today, early Web 2.0 creators and aficionados were more enthralled with the value of authenticity as the exact opposite of a commercial ethos (Blood 2002; Kitzman 2003). Today, however, the performance of an authentic self on social media has become a strategic move for political, economic, social, and personal gain (Gaden, Dumitrica 2015). Similarly, in the time between our SL study and the Meta Keynote, we have seen a shift from the early effervescence around the promises of accessibility to and the diversity of cultural content associated with user-generated content to its professionalization and commercialization (Cunningham, Craig 2021: 1). What brings such transformations together is an increased commercialization of (individual) creativity, taming its disruptive potential by re-inserting it into the wider culture industry structures (Kim 2012).

Such examples suggest that economic motives – rather than social needs – remain important drivers of the technological construction of the future. While a rhetorical insistence on building an amazing future (such as the one we could observe in Meta's Keynote) generates excitement over the things to come, it also allows for the artifacts and experiences of the past to

be elided. Yet, the lived realities of disinformation, trolling, and bullying remain in our individual memories. Take experience: While promising that the Metaverse will deliver “new amazing experiences”, the Keynote does not discuss the possibility of negatively emotional, unexpected, or unwelcome responses to the environment. During our time in SL, each of us documented a wide array of feelings. Sometimes we felt disoriented, disempowered, bored, uneasy, and fearful. We also wrote about feeling excited, engaged, and relaxed at other times (Dumitrica, Gaden 2008). In fact, the Meta Keynote's simplistic vision of social life, filled with smiling people/avatars and “amazing new experiences” stands, to us, in stark contrast to our daily lives, which are endlessly complex and varied. The sanitized future of the Metaverse rewrites our environment as “a ‘worse’ world in constant need of improvement, full of unused potentials and great challenges” (Haupt 2021: 251) and presents the Metaverse as the solution to all these problems and the enabler of all our dreams. Digital inequalities are glossed over, and the possibilities that individuals may *not want to connect*, or that they may actually be happy and satisfied with their current experiences, or that they may simply *lack the extra time* for inhabiting yet another (mediated) context, never come up.

Our experience in SL suggests that world-building entails ethical responsibilities. Who or what will ensure the Metaverse remains a safe space conducive to a positive experience for everyone? Which morality will underpin and be inscribed (through design choices) into this world? On such questions, the Keynote remains silent, merely passing the moral responsibility for a “just world” on to us: “We'll all need to work together from the beginning to bring the best possible version of this future to life”, Zuckerberg tells us (01:13:32). What this means in practice – and particularly in the context of a world that is supposed to become an all-encompassing social and economic realm – remains unclear. Privacy and safety, for instance, are

mentioned matter-of-factly: that they will be built into the Metaverse itself. But how will privacy and safety be implemented and monitored? Algorithms – and the social sorting that they reproduce with grave consequences for diversity, equity, and equality – were notoriously absent in the speech (mentioned only once in relation to the use of sensors to create mixed reality experiences). Indeed, questions around how inclusion, equality (including access), and equity would be enacted in the Metaverse remain unanswered.

The ideological accomplishment of the Keynote is, then, the shift in emphasis from how technology operates (including its flaws and possible consequences, intended or not) to the satisfaction of individual needs: “Isn’t that the ultimate promise of technology? To be together with anyone, to be able to teleport anywhere, and to be able to create and experience anything?” (01:12:07). In this way, the neoliberal obsession with incessant growth and change can become merely a reflection of social needs, while technocapitalists can legitimize themselves as altruistic forerunners of a future centered around the individual. As Zuckerberg put it in a subsequent interview, “I would hope that in the future, the organizing principle will be you, your identity, your stuff, your digital goods, your connections, and then you’ll be able to pretty seamlessly go between different experiences and different devices” (Zuckerberg and Thompson 2021: n.p.).

Studying Meta’s Keynote today, we see how much of the ideological work of the Keynote is calling us into this collaborative relationship to satisfy our own needs. The Keynote sells a promise of responding to and centering on individual needs (reminding us what those very needs are), but remains vague about Meta’s own revenue generation.

When we embarked on our SL study, we had no knowledge of the environment or creators of that environment. But we come to the Metaverse with immense exposure to Zuckerberg and his products: through our own use of these platforms, study of social

media and society, and broader exposure to media and popular culture commentary. We understand that Meta’s own revenue model consists of “enclave rents” (enabled by forcing both users and developers to stay within its proprietary ecosystem), “expected monopoly rents” (generating larger value – and therefore cheaper credits – based on expected future returns), “engagement rents” (produced by the ability to target advertising), and “reflexivity rents” (derived from the ability to manipulate proprietary algorithms) (Birch, Cochrane 2022). And while we may not expect to hear details of this in a promotional keynote video, it is important to acknowledge this complexity in comparison to what we do hear about an “*economy that we all need to create*” (32:49; note, the emphasis is ours) in the Metaverse. By making this economy a collective and bottom-up process, Meta’s role (and gain) takes a backseat.

In order to perform this ideological work, the Keynote assigns the three thematic areas that we identified in this essay with economic value. Throughout the Keynote, Zuckerberg and the other speakers consistently veer off to extoll the financial incentives of building in the Metaverse: promising to “enable as much creation and commerce as possible” (35:25) and to “maximize the overall creator economy” (36:15). Interestingly, although the Keynote frames the Metaverse as an enabler for individual creation, production, and economic success, we are reminded that the subsidized costs of some tools (mentioned but not fully elaborated upon) will remain a limited intervention, as Meta will bear these costs only “for some time” so that they “don’t lose too much money on this program, overall” (36: 23). It’s a rare moment of acknowledgment that the Meta bottom-line is of any concern at all.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Fifteen years ago, we were introduced to Second Life as a well-developed space of opportunity and vibrant communities, ready for us to join and participate in, but also open for us to be creative and innovative



with. The Metaverse, in its current state, is less developed than SL was then, and is presented in the Keynote as a work in progress. It is not yet clear what it will actually ultimately be: an all-encompassing virtual world fully hosted on Meta's infrastructure or, like Web 2.0, a narrative promoted by the tech industry and its enthusiasts in an attempt to make the future knowable and, most importantly, manageable via their technological solutions (Allen 2013; Liao, Iliadis 2021). In a subsequent interview, Zuckerberg explained the Keynote was not a "traditional corporate" presentation but rather a "description of the vision of what we're doing...It was meant to be a more expansive view of what we're hoping to build over the next, I don't know, call it ten years" (Zuckerberg, Thompson 2021: n.p.).

From our initial study of Meta's Keynote, we feel that, as with SL, this vision remains underpinned by a hegemonic (and deterministic) narrative of technology as the enabler of a better world centered upon individual choice, freedom, and creativity. As with SL, the Metaverse is presented as built by people for people; a collaboration that works to address social needs and, as it happens, also a boon for education and economic opportunities.

Yet, where the Keynote emphasizes the newness of what the Metaverse will offer, we saw little reason to believe that the lessons of past world-building or of recent public debates about Facebook's (mis)use of data or algorithmic manipulation of public opinion were heeded. Brief references to how Meta has "learned a lot from struggling with social issues and living under closed platforms" (01:15:07), enthusiasm around interoperability, and implicit portrayals of the Metaverse as intrinsically diverse and universally affordable were not convincing to us.

Our past journey in SL has taught us that building a virtual world is mediated between existing structures within both the virtual and offline realms, and individual perspectives and actions. As amazing and new the virtual environment may seem, both designers and users approach it through an already existing "stock of knowledge" (Schutz, Luckmann 1973). Even in an environment that users are supposed to populate with their creations, designer choices matter and need to be carefully scrutinized for how they insert and naturalize biases and inequalities within the "new" world. Power unfolds in many ways: the owners of the platform set not just the parameters of what is possible, but also do so in a way that position goals and the definitions of success and desirability. Users are not all equal and we come with our own identities, values, and assumptions – all of which mediate our experiences and filter our interpretations.

Meta's Keynote insists that the development of this world and the creation of this future is in the hands of the users and that Meta is working to "bring the best possible version of this future to life" (01:13:32). As Freishtat and Sandlin (2010) describe in their analysis of Facebook's "Public Pedagogy", the Keynote address leans on discourses of destiny and frontierism, describing the Metaverse as "the next frontier. Just like social networking was when it got started" (01:11:28). Yet, our experience of SL sensitized us to how rhetoric covers up the reinscription of familiar norms and biases; and how "new" platforms or tools generally turn out to be "a reflection of the physical world and the structures of power that operate therein" (Freishtat, Sandlin 2010: 518). Meta's Keynote promises us all the nice things. But we would be wise to unpack these gifts very carefully.

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