Preface and Acknowledgements

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What is the Metaverse?—almost all the following chapters begin with this question. Some authors approach the term from the recent past, referencing Neal Stephenson's science fiction dystopia *Snow Crash*,[1] for example. In contrast, others start with current debates, such as Facebook's rebranding to Meta or the success of gaming platforms like FORTNITE[2] and ROBLOX.[3]

Of course, all these attempts to define the Metaverse are ultimately doomed to failure because, like other shimmering terms in media culture, the Metaverse defies precise classification, and, upon closer inspection, proves to be a highly diffuse concept that has been extremely adaptable throughout media history. This lack of a clear definition of the Metaverse, however, is not a bug but a feature of the following chapters. They demonstrate the diversity of the many past and present incarnations of the Metaverse and their technical, social, cultural, and economic implications.

This text is a preface, not an introduction. It does not seek to fail by adding yet another definition of the Metaverse. It is merely intended to provide an overview of the following chapters (and their many Metaverses) and, most importantly, to lead up to the actual introduction to this volume: "The Modern Prehistory of the Metaverse." In this chapter, Gundolf S. Freyermuth[4] sheds light on the historical intertwining of technology and its social implementation. He traces the developments that led to the idea of the Metaverse and illustrates their "dialectical relationship": from the concepts of the Gesamtkunstwerk and Total Cinema through visions of Cyberspace and the Holodeck to the prehistory and aftereffects of the

1 Stephenson, Neal: *Snow Crash*, New York, NY: Bantam Books 1992.

2 FORTNITE (Epic Games, 2017, O: Epic Games).

3 ROBLOX (Roblox Corporation, 2006, O: Roblox Corporation).

4 In this volume pp. 13-98.

Metaverse. The investigation shows how this dynamic enables a continuous and comprehensive immersion that transitions "from shorter or longer but always intermittent and transient engagement with single media works to a comprehensive and enduring immersion in media worlds."

Following this modern prehistory of the Metaverse, the contributions are divided into two major sections: "Imaginations" and "Achievements." "Imaginations" offers an exploration of the concepts, visions, and potential effects of a Metaverse, ranging from early literary ideas to contemporary audiovisual representations. The section begins with Janet H. Murray's[5] chapter "The Metaverse and Other Digital Delusions," an investigation of false promises surrounding the Metaverse. Taking various advertising messages produced by companies such as Meta, Apple, and Magic Leap as examples, Murray shows how "magical technology" is marketed in recurring cycles and promoted with large financial resources due to the fear of missing out. However, the real needs of the public are often not met. Murray argues for a more realistic view of new technologies, the establishment of which always requires a "collective effort" that "cannot be short-circuited."

Lars Schmeink[6] looks at the history of ideas surrounding the Metaverse "way before transhumanists and tech-entrepreneurs like Mark Zuckerberg discovered it for themselves and their plans to exploit it for personal monetary gain." In his paper "Incarnations of the Metaverse in Science Fiction," he traces a whole series of science fiction novels and films beyond Stephenson's *Snow Crash*[7] back over a hundred years and compares stories that "developed the idea [of the Metaverse] in different, meaningful ways."

A continuation of this approach can be found in Vanessa Ossa's[8] contribution, in which she "follow[s] the trail of the Metaverse as an audiovisual fantasy in mostly Western live-action films and television." Ossa provides a transparent account of her methodological approach and the selection processes of the examples she discusses. Her analysis reveals similarities and differences between Metaverse visions "depicted in fictional, audiovisual media," as well as "broader considerations about the nature of our reality, (virtual) identity, concerns about security, surveillance in digital environments, and the use of AI technology."

5 In this volume pp. 101-115.

6 In this volume pp. 117-138.

7 N. Stephenson: *Snow Crash*.

8 In this volume pp. 139-166.

Based on a re-reading of science fiction narratives and current efforts to realize concepts of the Metaverse, Icare Bamba[9] notes: "Our bodies [...] seem very close to touching virtual reality and melting into it. It seems less and less virtual." In his phenomenological approach titled "Body-Crash: 'The Impact Will Be Real,'" he aims to find out "what this new relationship with the virtual and the world entails; to grasp the impact of using these immersive technologies in our lives; to understand and even anticipate how we will relate as embodied subjects to the new world of the Metaverse."

In her essay "Metaverse (Re)Visions," Sonia Fizek[10] also discusses the possible consequences of a unified Metaverse for users. While big tech companies like to advertise that the Metaverse should be built collectively, current developments do not suggest collective ownership. Fizek highlights the dangers of this potential future scenario from three perspectives: the privatization of the Internet, surveillance capitalism, and technofeudalism.

The first section of this anthology concludes with Jesse Schell's[11] contribution, "The Metaverse: What's Now, What's Next." Schell deconstructs several myths surrounding virtual reality, augmented reality, online worlds, and blockchain as four technologies commonly associated with the Metaverse. In the process, he explains why the Metaverse could look very different from how it is often portrayed in technology fictions and advertising campaigns, for example, because "the Metaverse does not want to be one continuous world, and it will not be. [...] Worlds are powerful because they have boundaries."

The second section, "Achievements," is dedicated to practical applications, innovative approaches, and advancements in the field of interactive experiences. It begins with the topic of staging art in digital spaces. In "From Pixels to Emotions," Isabelle Hamm[12] explores the question "in which ways virtual exhibitions—and in this case, in particular Metaverse art exhibitions—can address the conflict between analog and digital spatiality and create compelling art experiences." To do so, she applies German philosopher Gernot Böhme's theory of atmospheres to art presentations on the platforms FORTNITE, OCCUPY WHITE WALLS, and WWWFORUM and analyzes the value of digital atmospheres for the respective art experience.

9 In this volume pp. 167-185.

10 In this volume pp. 187-199.

11 In this volume pp. 201-220.

12 In this volume pp. 223-246.

The interview "Virtual Wonderlands," conducted by Isabelle Hamm with Alina Fuchte,[13] provides a more in-depth look at WWWFORUM, an exhibition space belonging to the NRW-Forum Düsseldorf. This Metaverse exhibition space is one of the first of its kind in the art and museum scene and has hosted four exhibitions since March 2023. Central topics and questions of the conversation are: "What exhibition practices are suitable for museums in the Metaverse?", "Which challenges can arise in the areas of mediation and communication?" and "What can be gained by museums being present in the Metaverse?" In this context, Fuchte talks "about the creation and first year of wwwforum, the insights gained, digital curating" and about ideas for expanding the communication possibilities for users in WWWFORUM.

Communication and social interaction are also topics in the next paper. In the case study of the artistic research project "Quantum Bar," Christina XaosPrincess Kinne[14] talks about the creation process of a GPT-3-driven chatbot for social virtual reality. "Quantum Bar is designed to be a welcoming space for social VR users looking for someone to talk to," a digital bar where users can interact with a GPT-3-driven bartender to connect emotionally. Kinne reports on the interdisciplinary challenges regarding the design and production, the technologies used, various use cases, the ethical commitment regarding "the characterization and narrative of the chatbot," the "shaping of the avatar and its animation," and the "auralization and localization in the virtual environment."

The following chapter reports on an experimental research design that explores experiences in VR in combination with haptic sensations. In "Let's Play the Metaverse ...!," Tobias Bieseke[15] presents findings from the artistic research project Ndinguwe. With the help of overlaid avatar representations, the project aims to encourage participants to examine how they perceive themselves and others, as well as forms of discrimination. Using the method of microphenomenology, Bieseke addresses the research question, "How can the imagination of the individual be brought into co-dynamic coherence with the possibilities of the Metaverse?" and provides insights into selected participant surveys from the experiment.

Avatars as a projection surface also play a central role in Nicolle Lamerichs'[16] essay "Towards a Responsible Metaverse." The author focuses on new forms of fashion in the digital space, related market mechanisms, and the significance of

13 In this volume pp. 247-264.

14 In this volume pp. 265-307.

15 In this volume pp. 309-334.

16 In this volume pp. 335-350.

virtual fashion for online users. She explores the question of "how digital fashion allows us to express our digital identity in new ways." In particular, she addresses aspects of (digital) identity and the inclusive potential that unfolds through the separation of virtual and physical bodies. Lamerichs advocates for more opportunities for co-creation in order to strengthen individuality in the Metaverse.

The section "Achievements" concludes with Giovanni Tagliamonte's[17] contribution, which describes the Akihabara district in Tokyo as a "proto-metaverse," or more precisely, as a "hyperreal" place—as defined by Umberto Eco—that anticipated the emergence of virtual worlds. Tagliamonte analyzes the culture and history of the place, in which analog and virtual space are in dynamic interaction and seem to merge into a unified whole.

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17 In this volume pp. 351-392.

LITERATURE

Stephenson, Neal: *Snow Crash,* New York, NY: Bantam Books 1992.

GAMOGRAPHY/METAVERSES

FORTNITE (Epic Games, 2017, O: Epic Games)
ROBLOX (Roblox Corporation, 2006, O: Roblox Corporation)