

Introduction: One, none, a hundred thousand metaverses

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The announcement of the metaverse is quite a unique case in digital media history. Unlike previous product launches, the metaverse was introduced not as a stabilized medium or platform but as a promissory assemblage: a future socio-technical system made of interoperable “worlds” and grounded in new and more exciting interactions during working and leisure activities. Facebook rebranding in Meta and the subsequent *Connect* event exemplify a combination of performative futurity with a form of corporational determinism, whereby corporate actors seek to govern expectations by staging futures in advance of their material realization (Couldry & Mejias 2019; Natale et al. 2019).

This mode of announcement is not incidental. Rather, it reflects a broader transformation in how platforms consolidate power by framing sociotechnical horizons before their consequences can be assessed at the public and institutional level. The rapid rise and subsequent decline of the metaverse hype have followed a recurring pattern within platform capitalism: speculative amplification leads to discursive saturation and public underestimation, especially once the gap between promises and reality becomes visible, or, as in the case of the metaverse, the “new” technology remains intangible or even nonexistent. However, the waning of the metaverse hype, clearly replaced by the AI one, should not be interpreted as a total failure: although the material and imaginative construction of the metaverse is less prominent in the public debate, tech corporations are still investing their resources in the heterogeneous realm of augmented/extended/virtual or, as we prefer to call it, mixed reality (MR), searching for the new killer app or device that will convince the userbase to adopt and domesticate MR technologies on a global scale. Furthermore, in some national contexts, the hype around the metaverse is much more stable and persistent than elsewhere, as this issue aims to demonstrate through the contributions of Chinese scholars engaged in the theoretical and political understanding of the metaverse in their country.

In addressing the multiple identities of the metaverse, this issue contributes to the growing body of literature on MR, adopting a multifaceted perspective on the various narratives and imaginaries surrounding the metaverse as a concept, infrastructure, environment, world, or story. From our viewpoint, metaverses are not only singular “worlds” but socio-technical configurations composed of platforms, interfaces, standards, labour practices, governance mechanisms, and communicative strategies that differ depending on each situated context, and especially on the players under scrutiny (e.g., companies, institutions, and users). All these dimensions are deeply interconnected with the way in which metaverses are or can be imagined, promoted and spread locally and worldwide. The upcoming “winning” metaverse, if it ever emerges, will do so at the intersection of technology, practices, and, of course, power (Hesselbein and Bory 2025); but this power, as the collapse of the hype around the metaverse demonstrates, is not only made of money and media influence, but also of imagination (Benjamin 2024) and from the different

expectations and social needs emerging from the pluriverse of the cultural, political, economic and social contexts (Girginova 2025).

Within such a plural and contested landscape, analysing local and national imaginaries of the metaverse is essential for understanding the complex articulation of narratives, infrastructures, and politics. Rather than adopting a Silicon Valley-centric model of platform expansion, metaverse-related developments in countries such as China are embedded in a distinctive constellation of state-led industrial policy, domestic platform ecosystems, and regulatory frameworks, emphasizing different ideas of data sovereignty and cultural alignment (Schneider 2023).

As the article by Jia Dongjia aptly shows, the Chinese metaverse cannot be understood as localized replica of Western platforms; it rather constitutes an alternative trajectory in which immersive media are articulated with national development strategies, besides situated forms of infrastructural governance. In the same vein, the roundtable section that collects insights from Liu Hailong, Ji Deqiang, and Xie Xuefang suggests a de-Westernized approach to the Metaverse, most notably through the examination of the “Chinese-style cultural metaverse”. In their view, unlike the Silicon Valley-centric model that frames the virtual as a form of digital escapism, the Chinese trajectory based on techno-nationalism, technical rationality, and market logic, positions MR as a carrier of civilization and a tool of heritage preservation.

This boundary work of the metaverse is pragmatically juxtaposed with the false myth of an endless and unbounded metaverse, as Chris Hesselbein demonstrates in his contribution. The myth of a never-ending space obfuscates the inner dynamics of platform capitalism and vertical control by Big Tech companies. Federico Biggio’s contribution helps us to understand the historical and aesthetic trajectory on which this myth has been constructed. These contributions help to deconstruct the myth of limitless and historical imaginaries of virtuality, highlighting how Western narratives (US in particular) obscure the totalizing control and reterritorialization of platform capitalism, emphasizing main trends such as abundance and disembodiment. Fabio Iapaolo and Marcus Pingitore highlight in their empirical analysis how new “worlding” practices at the local level - i.e., in the Italian context - oscillate between community/market-driven needs and the concurrent dependence on platforms and big tech players. Moving again beyond the dominant “big tech” narratives promoted by corporations like Meta, Apple and Nvidia, the authors argue that the Metaverse should not be seen as a single global highway built by a single contractor but as a vast, interconnected series of local neighbourhoods.

Overall, this issue of *Funes* illustrates the contested imaginaries of the metaverse, oscillating between Zuckerberg's utopia (or dystopia) and a complete failure, which confirms the need for a symmetrical and more nuanced approach in analysing such phenomena (Magaudda and Balbi 2024). The metaverse imaginaries are already contributing to the present and future of MR and will likely give rise to unexpected practices and new forms of “worldings”, yet to be discovered, but not to be left unexplored in the making.

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