

BACK TO THE METAVERSE

Marco Cadioli

Accademia di Belle Arti di Carrara

marco.cadioli@gmail.com

ESSAY 141/09

METAVVERSE

SECOND LIFE

REPORTAGE

IN-GAME PHOTOGRAPHY

The metaverse is not a new concept; since 2005, online platforms have been experimenting with 3D virtual worlds, which are permanent spaces built by users. The most successful experience in this regard was *Second Life*, which rekindled the previous hype around the metaverse between

the end of 2006 and the beginning of 2007. Through the narrative of the reports taken with the avatar Marco Manray, the early history of *Second Life* is retraced, comparing it to recent attempts at creating a metaverse. The topic of in-game photography is also introduced.

THE WHIRLPOOL

Between the end of 2021 and the beginning of 2022, I spent numerous days at the entrance to *Decentraland*, a 3D virtual world based on the Ethereum blockchain. This is precisely where avatars would first arrive and try to figure out what to do.

If one does not already have a specific destination in mind upon entering *Decentraland*¹, they find themselves in a square with a large abyss at its center. The actual entry into the virtual world involves literally jumping into the abyss. I am unsure why this mode of entry was chosen, but it immediately struck me as having a strong symbolic value. Newcomers usually passed through here; for many, it was their first time entering the metaverse, enticed by the hype spreading through the media then. They wondered what to do and where to go; they had most likely exchanged money to obtain the local currency, *Mana*, and were now trying to figure out what to do with it. Regardless, everyone had to plunge into that abyss, and I filmed a crowd of people jumping into an abyss without knowing exactly where they were going or why.

In reality, there was a reason. Mark Zuckerberg had announced a few days earlier the company's name change from Facebook to Meta, and he did so with a *Founder's Letter*² that marked the birth of a new chapter for the entire internet and called it the Metaverse:

We are at the beginning of the next chapter for the internet, and it's the next chapter for our company, too. We've gone from desktop to web to mobile, from text to photos to video. But this isn't the end of the line. The next platform will be even more immersive – an embodied internet where you're in the experience, not just looking at it. We call this the Metaverse, and it will touch every product we build. (The Founder's Letter, 2021)

This stance by Facebook suddenly put the spotlight on the metaverse; a new chapter for the internet was beginning, while there was already a lot of interest in Web 3.0, blockchain, and cryptocurrencies, and everything seemed to converge.



Figure 1 Marco Cadioli, *The Whirlpool*, 2022, video 5:58

One could not miss the moment. One had to enter the metaverse and jump into the abyss without asking too many questions. Thus, a small crowd of newcomers gathered at the entrance to one of the most well-known metaverses at the time, and I was shooting a video³.

Some accidentally left their microphones open, allowing real-world sounds to enter the virtual space. Some spoke directly in their native language, transforming the square into a Tower of Babel with people speaking Russian, German, Spanish, some Italian, and, of course, many English, before plunging into the abyss.

THE PROMISE

The promise was simple: to make money. Everyone had heard of NFTs; six months prior, Beeples had sold the famous

\$69 million NFT. The possession and exchange of digital assets were the new trends, and in the metaverse, NFTs also included clothing, parcels of land, and accessories for avatars. Anything could be converted into an NFT and sold; all it took was the right idea.

Entering the metaverse also required opening a digital wallet like *Metamask* and having cryptocurrencies to spend. This process was not necessarily straightforward. One could enter *Decentraland* without a digital wallet, but the experience would be limited – no purchases, no friends, and a different avatar whenever you switched devices. Essentially, you could only take a brief stroll as a guest.

Meanwhile, the hype surrounding the metaverse continued to grow through various ‘firsts’: the first school in the metaverse, the first wedding ceremony, a concert, the opening of a museum, and the first metaverse *Fashion Week*. This showcased the metaverse’s future socio-economic benefits, images of work meetings, historical reconstructions for learning history, and doctors providing immersive training.

Many major companies were launching projects concurrently with Meta’s *Horizon Worlds*. Microsoft *Mesh* was

Figure 2 People in *Decentraland*, 2021. Screenshot of the author



announced in November 2021, and Disney began developing its own metaverse strategy. In early 2022, they formed a team to envision their extended virtual parks. Nvidia's *Omniverse* provided a platform for creating applications in the metaverse, and its stock prices soared. These were just a few examples.

The metaverse was shaping up as a plurality of possible worlds. The term 'metaverse' was sometimes used to refer to the collection of all different virtual worlds and other times to indicate a single immersive environment.

Some of these platforms had been available online for years but only became popular due to the hype in early 2022. Examples include *Roblox*, founded in 2004 and popular among young gamers, and *Minecraft*, which already had over 100 million active monthly users in 2021. Blockchain-based platforms like *The Sandbox* (established in 2018) and *Decentraland* (developed in 2015 and opened to the public in 2020) were also part of this wave.

A proliferation of virtual worlds was underway, each with its own token for blockchain-based transactions. It was unclear whether new worlds were being created using their

Figure 3 Marco Cadioli, *The Promise*, 2003



own cryptocurrency or if cryptocurrencies were launched first and then associated with virtual worlds. *RedFox* (RFOX), *Alien Worlds* (TLM), *Star Atlas* (ATLAS), *Ufo Gaming* (UFO), *Axie Infinity* (AXF), *Wilder World* (WILD), and *Somnium* (CUBE) are some of the names of new platforms and their respective cryptocurrencies, forming a sector known as *Virtual Reality Crypto* present in exchanges.

Following the announcements in October 2021, there were surges in value, such as *Mana*, the currency of *Decentraland*, which went from less than a dollar in September 2021 to nearly \$6 in November 2021 but has since dropped to less than \$0.3 as of June 2023. The *Sand*, *The Sandbox's* currency, now worth less than \$0.5, reached over \$8 in November 2021. These fluctuations were not only related to cryptocurrency speculation but also indicators of a moment of great confidence in emerging metaverses and the anticipated prospects of rapid development driven by strong hype.

The value of virtual land also experienced a surge when *Decentraland* witnessed the highest-ever land sale. The fashion industry believed in the metaverse, and in March 2022, the first *Metaverse Fashion Week* took place, featuring brands such as Dolce & Gabbana, Etro, Dundas, Estée Lauder, and Tommy Hilfiger. According to official data, it had 108,000 unique visits during the 5-day event, which included fashion shows, events, after-parties, conferences, and concerts.

I attended some fashion shows where they presented garments designed for avatars and collections connected to the real world. It was genuinely an interesting experience that showcased the potential of the metaverse. Dolce & Gabbana's 'catwalk' with models dressed as cats was quite entertaining, and after-parties featured concerts by Bob Sinclar and Grimes. However, the attempt to replicate the experience the following year was not as successful, and the 2023 *Metaverse Fashion Week* had very few participants, with the novelty factor already fading away.

In *Decentraland*, there was a significant animation for avatars that, in my opinion, captured the spirit of the hype at the



Figure 4 Dolce and Gabbana show at *Metaverse Fashion Week*, 2022. Cat walk, with cats walking the runway as models. Screenshot of the author

time. Avatars would throw money in the air, mimicking the gesture from the 'Money Rain' GIF⁴, which had already become a meme. I filmed many avatars repeating that gesture, making it a performance in various situations and contexts.

SPACE

The network was initially built upon the concept of shared documents, a distributed hypertext whose fundamental idea is still contained in the acronym HTTP that precedes URLs.

Over time, there was a growing realization that the development of the web was constructing a space. This was expressed through metaphors of navigation, the use of the term 'website' to refer to network nodes and the creation of spatial representations of databases. Lev Manovich analyzed the aesthetics of early navigable spaces even before



Figure 5 Bob Sinclair concert at *Metaverse Fashion Week, 2022*. Screenshot of the author

the internet, starting with games like *Doom* (1993) and *Myst* (1993), in a 1998 essay where he quoted Robyn Miller, one of the co-designers of *Myst*, who said:

We are creating environments to just wander around inside of. People have been calling it a game for lack of anything better, and we've called it a game at times. But that's not what it really is; it's a world. (Manovich, 1998)

A world was being constructed – a world in which one could get lost. In that same essay, Manovich introduced the figures of the *Digital Flâneur* and the *Explorer* in relation to navigable spaces. In the early years of the internet's diffusion, these concepts were naturally extended to online experiences, as expressed in the 2002 essay by artist Miltos

Manetas titled *Websites Are The Art Of Our Times*, which opens with the statement: “Because the internet is not just another ‘media,’ as the Old Media insists, but mostly a ‘space,’ similar to the American Continent immediately after it was discovered” (Manetas, 2002).

Indeed, in the following years, we witnessed the colonization of this continent, setting in motion a process that, starting in 2005, led to the increasingly social-oriented population of this space. The experience of 3D environments, already present in console video games, became enriched in online interactions with other players, and the construction of the metaverse began to be glimpsed.

BACK TO THE METAVERSE

Within this context, virtual worlds, particularly *Second Life*, experienced peak development between the end of

Figure 6 Marco Cadioli, *We are here (I am the fly)*, 2004. Screenshot @randommedia.co.uk





Figure 7 October 18, 2006
Reuters opens an office in *Second Life*. Screenshot of the author

2006 and the beginning of 2007. One of Philip Rosedale's key insights as the founder of Linden Lab in San Francisco, the company behind *Second Life*'s software, was to free virtual worlds from the constraints of predefined fantasy environments. Instead, he provided a platform where users could create their own content. This led to a bottom-up construction that expressed trends and subcultures that users gathered around.

Philip Rosedale began working on his dream of building virtual reality environments as early as 1999. He stated that he invented *Second Life* as an evolution of the network and a place for social interaction. He was inspired by *Snow Crash* in constructing the metaverse, just as Zuckerberg would confirm more than 15 years later.

Everything that the new hype of 2021–2022 was pushing had already happened, albeit without blockchain technology. However, it had already taken place in the realm of imagination, in the myth of a possible extension of reality into the network, initially in literature and then in early immersive online experiences.

To understand today's metaverse, or at least the attempts made so far to construct it, it is important to refer to the *Second Life* experience, which remains the largest experimentation of a user-built permanent 3D online space. I entered *Second Life* in 2005 with the avatar Marco Manray. Initially, users could not freely choose their own names, and *Second Life* provided a list of possible names to choose from. That day, 'Manray' was available, and it became my avatar's names, which I still use.

From the very beginning, Marco Manray was a photographer. I entered *Second Life* specifically to document the birth of the metaverse through photography. When the first hype about the metaverse erupted between the end of 2006 and 2007, it seemed natural for print media outlets to have reporters from virtual worlds. Reportages by Marco Manray were published in newspapers such as Liberation

Figure 8 Headquarters of Wired Magazine in *Second Life*, October 2006. Screenshot of the author



(Paris), El Pais (Madrid), Repubblica (Milan), Elle Decor (Milan), AD Architectural Digest (Milan), and Le Temps (Geneva) in the book *Second Life, un monde possible* (De Cayeux & Guibert-Brussel, 2008). I documented Marco Manray's adventures in the book *Io, reporter in Second Life* (Cadioli, 2007).

This list intends to convey the idea of the existing interest surrounding the virtual world, with reflections that go beyond marketing announcements and immediate promises. The reportages documented some key moments, such as Reuters entering *Second Life* in October 2006, Wired magazine's presence, the construction of The Avastar headquarters, the weekly tabloid with news and gossip from within the virtual community published by Bild.T-Online in Berlin, and lasted a few months. The entry of real-world companies was also newsworthy back then: General Motors, Toyota, Nissan, Lancia, IBM, Intel, Dell, Cisco Systems, Microsoft, Harvard Law School, the University of Southern California, L'Oréal, and the list could go on. Concerts were organized, live performances took place in many venues every evening, poetry readings, book presentations, conferences, and meditation groups were held, and, during the *Burning Days*, a parallel festival was held in *Second Life*.

Figure 9 *Burning Man in Second Life*, 2007. Screenshot of the author



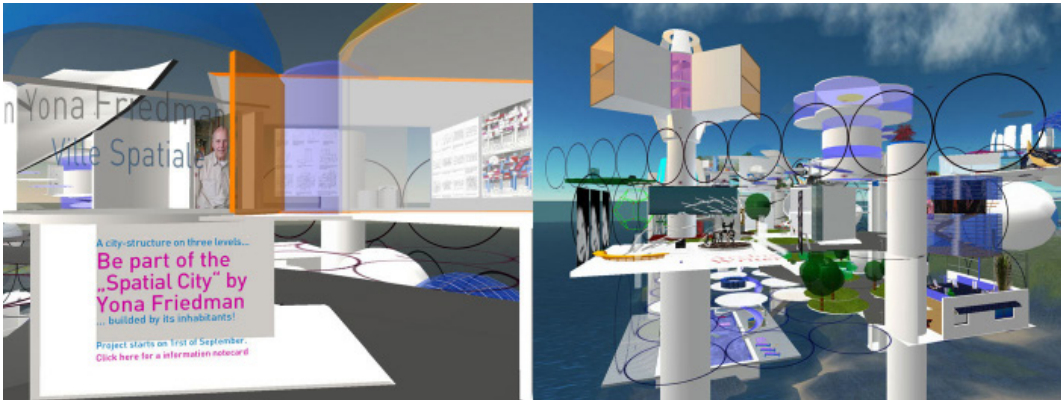


Figure 10 The reconstruction experiment of *Ville spatiale*, Yona Friedman's 1959-1960 utopian project. Screenshot of the author

Alongside the private initiatives of those who invented clothing lines, real-world brands such as Adidas entered, and American Apparel proposed cross-marketing strategies between the virtual and real worlds, selling clothing for both situations. The fashion industry spawned specialized magazines, shops, fashion shows, and collection launches. Dior launched a jewelry collection, and Lacoste presented its Spring 2007 collection with Marco Manray as the photographer.

There were reflections and experiences of democratic participation in defining internal rules, with islands based on laws freely decided by residents through a voting system. In a relatively short period, diverse advanced issues were addressed in a collective process involving residents and their expertise. Challenges included designing common spaces and developing design forms for private residences and company headquarters. The architecture of navigable spaces was explored without necessarily mimicking the real world, and designers tackled the development of objects that considered the characteristics of the metaverse and its needs and functions.

Aimee Weber was one of the greatest designers of *Second Life*. She designed the headquarters of American Apparel, created her own fashion line, and worked for the Exploratorium Museum in San Francisco. Exploring themes such as identity, body image, sex, art, and political participation deepened.

Figure 11 Aimee Weber portrayed in singer Regina Spector's studio in *Second Life*. 2006. Screenshot of the author



Artists played an important role in experimentation, and a community formed that constituted a recognized avant-garde, even by real-world institutions, gathering on the island of Odyssey. However, a separate essay would be needed to delve into art in virtual worlds, covering interesting contemporary experiences.

I became a special correspondent for virtual worlds for Liberation in Paris during that period. I was a reporter from a different world, treated like any other reporter. In January 2007, I covered the entry of French politicians into the metaverse during the presidential elections.

I met with the journalist who would write the piece in *Second Life*. I had never met her in person, only as an avatar. Together, we conducted interviews and visited the party headquarters. We created the service 'Votez virtuel' (vote virtual), which made the front page of the newspaper with a photo of Ségolène Royal's avatar taken at the headquarters of the Parti Socialiste in *Second Life*, with the support of the group *Désir d'avenir Comité 748*, where 748 referred to the numbering of various support committees in the real world.

The Front National of Le Pen also opened a headquarters, obviously with its symbols and values, and there was

Figure 12 *Votez Virtuel*,
Liberation cover, 20/01/2007



an island for committees supporting Sarkozy. The metaverse was being experimented with as a platform for political communication, taking advantage of the ability to organize participatory debates and create meeting places, informational points, architectural structures, and symbolic spaces. The news ended up in the political pages of newspapers, not in the gaming sections, anticipating the use of social worlds for political communication, which would later converge on much larger dimensions within Facebook. Facebook was born in those same years but would aggregate an infinitely larger number of users.

It is amusing, if not infuriating, to see how today there is a tendency to start over, narrating as something new what has already been experimented with, following the interests of a corporation to support the idea that everything is new and freshly invented, operating on a closed and corporate model. It is like those cities that are built all at once, based on a predetermined business model and idea, but then remain uninhabited. First and foremost, today's

metaverse has remained empty, without residents, real relationships, and a true emotional motivation to enter. The legless avatars in the Meta world make this ideology of tele-conference meeting busts evident.

MARCO MANRAY

I had started photographing the internet in 2003, based on a series of statements collected in the *Net Photography Manifesto* (Cadioli, 2003), in which I asserted the possibility of exploring photography within the spaces of the internet and the need to capture, through photography, the construction of the world beyond the screen.

My research focused on the theme of the remediation of traditional photography within the virtual world and the possibility of giving documentary value to photographs taken in a synthetic world. A world that has its autonomy because, as Lev Manovich stated, “Synthetic computer-generated imagery is not an inferior representation of our reality but a realistic representation of a different reality” (Manovich, 2002).

In the manifesto, I referenced Susan Sontag, stating that screenshots certified that the experience had been made and the journey undertaken. “Essentially, the camera makes everyone a tourist in other people’s reality and eventually in one’s own” (Sontag, 1977) There was no problem in appropriating, through screenshots, creations that someone had made because, to quote Susan Sontag again, “to take a photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed” (Sontag, 1977).

That event had happened, and a device had captured it. “Has been,” according to Roland Barthes’ concept of the photograph, “all photography is a certificate of presence” (Barthes, 1980/81). There is a tendency to think that in a synthetic and simulated world, everything is infinitely reproducible in the same way, numerically. However, one realizes that time passes, that events belong to human time and not



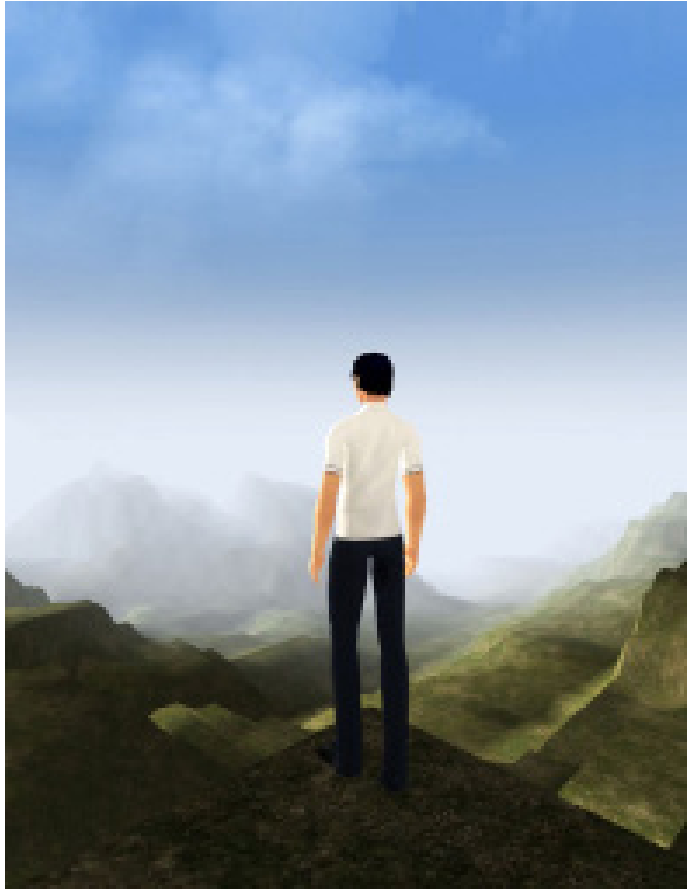
Figure 13 Marco Cadioli,
ARENAE, Omaha Beach, 2005

machine time, and that synthetic representations change, age, and disappear. Photography also provides a sense of memory in the metaverse, which has often been observed by showing the images to those present at the event. They recognize their avatars in the shot and find a sense of familiarity with the places.

Forms of photography in video games have gradually gained recognition, finding theoretical support starting with Cindy Poremba's seminal essay *Point and Shot. Remediating photography in gamespace* (2007), one of the first systematic studies on in-game photography. Poremba states:

if the process and ritual behind this image-making is similar, the players themselves are validating the reality of their subjects simply by creating a document of these experiences. In this sense, players are taking real photos, just in virtual spaces. (Poremba, 2007)

Figure 14 Marco Cadioli, *Der Neue Wanderer*, 2008



In 2005, I had already done a report on massively multiplayer online war games such as Quake3, Counter-Strike, and Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory. I photographed the Normandy landing, the D-Day, which was reenacted every day by players competing in a historically reconstructed war scenario. I moved as an 'embedded' photographer in the style of Robert Capa, escorted by professional players as I disembarked from the ship and headed towards the shore to avoid being killed immediately. This reportage was my first experience as a photographer in the virtual world and laid the foundation for many more reportages in the following years.

With Marco Manray, I explored various virtual worlds and proto-metaverse forms in their infancy, often lasting only a few years and never taking off. This was the case with the Chinese virtual world *HiPiHi*, which opened in Beijing in 2007. It had an interface with ideograms and very little documentation. In that situation, the experience of loss was strong, having crossed a border and being in the network's peripheries. It was impossible for me to communicate with the very few avatars I encountered. There were fewer than 10,000 residents, and only the predefined gestures of the avatars became a common language: waving, bowing, or simply approaching and sensing the presence of the other in an incomprehensible chat. During that journey, I took *Der Neue Wanderer*, a version of Caspar David Friedrich's painting *Der Wanderer Above The Sea Of Fog*. The world before me evoked the same sublime feeling as the painting, in a disorientation found online in the early forms of the metaverse, still exotic and remote.

This fascination has naturally been lost in these years of network development. The remote island has been discovered, and a tourist village has been built on it. Today's metaverse presents itself as a shiny product based on blockchain,

Figure 15 Marco Cadioli,
Rousseau reloaded, 2006



connected to cryptocurrencies, and attentive to the issues of digital asset ownership and business. It has moved alongside NFTs and met the same fate. It has proposed a usage model designed by big tech companies without allowing for true grassroots development or emotional investment, and as I mentioned earlier, it has remained inevitably empty.

In the meantime, new devices have emerged that shift the focus to an augmented reality model, where the metaverse, if it exists, will be experienced as a digital layer superimposed on reality. It will be a mixed experience, not just immersive, where real data and objects coexist, just as bodies and avatars will coexist. Alternatively, it might be designed by an AI.

NOTES

- 1 <https://decentraland.org/>
- 2 <https://about.fb.com/news/2021/10/founders-letter/>
- 3 Marco Cadioli "The Whirlpool", 2022 video 5:58 <https://vimeo.com/692627855>
- 4 <https://giphy.com/search/money-rain>

REFERENCES

- Barthes, R. (1981). *Camera Lucida. Reflections on photography* (O. Howard, Trans.) New York: Hill and Wang (Original work published 1980).
- Cadioli, M. (2003). Net Photography Manifesto. Retrieved May, 04, 2024 from <https://marcocadioli.com/internet-landscape/>
- Cadioli, M. (2007). *Io reporter in Second Life*. Milano, IT: ShaKe.
- De Cayeux, A., & Guibert-Brussel, C. (Eds.). (2008). *Second Life, un monde possible*. Paris: Les petits matins.
- Manetas, M. (2002). *Websites Are The Art Of Our Times*. Retrieved May, 04, 2024 from <http://www.manetas.com/txt/websitesare.htm>
- Manovich, L. (2002). *The language of new media*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Manovich, L. (1998). *Navigable space*. Retrieved May, 04, 2024 from http://manovich.net/content/04-projects/021-navigable-space/18_article_1998.pdf
- Poremba, C. (2007). Point and Shoot: Remediating Photography in Gamespace. *Games and Culture* 2(1), 49-58. 10.1177/1555412006295397.
- Sontag, S. (1977). *On Photography*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

Article available at

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2724-2463/18177>

How to cite

as article

Cadioli, M. (2023). Back to the metaverse. *img journal*, 9, pp. 106-127

as contribution in book

Cadioli, M. (2023). Back to the metaverse. In A. Alfieri, D. Rossi (Eds.), *img journal 9/2023 Metaverse Dilemma* (pp. 106-127) Alghero, IT: Publica. ISBN 9788899586447



© 2023 The authors. The text of this work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.