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COMMENTARY

The Metaverse: Andrew McStay's Responses to Cody Turner

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My first response is to thank Cody Turner for his commentary and engaging with the paper (Turner, 2023). Second is to thank the *Philosophy & Technology* team for facilitating substantive discussion.

The original paper (McStay, 2023) flagged that the so-called Metaverse is a problematic premise in terms of its definition and social implications. This said, for now, that coming years will involve more rather than less three-dimensional Internet experiences, accessible by input devices such as cameras, augmented reality, virtual reality, and biometrics, should not be controversial.

The commentary by Turner captures the gist of the original paper well, where I argued that *surveillant physics* represents an exponential expansion of commercial and potentially governmental surveillance of the Metaverse. Key is that the results of this surveillance feed into the laws and make-up of Metaverse environments (or whatever the agreed term ends up being), hence the appropriation of 'physics'. The next stage in my argument, which is a little more nuanced, but hopefully valuable, is the attempt to advance the notion of *virtual realist governance*. Certainly, there is much legal and policy attention being paid to online harms, but it seemed to me that something was missing to these considerations that the literature on virtual realism was able to help with. Readers of *Philosophy & Technology* who have tried virtual and augmented reality headsets will be familiar with the substantive difference of experience between screens (looking at) and immersive contexts (being in and with).

Turner's probing of my assumption about the virtual element of virtual realist governance is an important one. Turner does not argue against the assumption, but instead encourages proponents of virtual realist governance not to uncritically assume a 'virtual monist' position. This is not simply a question of realism versus fictionalism, although I tend to the former since things experienced as virtual objects have causal properties on people. Ali (2023), whom Turner cites, is interesting in that Ali challenges the reader to think about different values of the virtual, leading Turner to suggest a more pluralistic account of value in relation to the virtual. I agree and there is an opportunity that requires more work than is possible here, but it would be interesting to create a taxonomy of issues that virtual realist governance

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might be asked to address, such as in-world abuse, deep-fakery, privacy, and deception, and how they map onto value types suggested by Ali (2023). Also interesting is whether a virtual item, or issue, creates a distinct value (*sui generis*). This would be very helpful in laying out a more practical application of virtual realist governance, moving discussion on from equivalence versus fantasy, to uniqueness through different types of reality.

Turner also flags the need that any notion of the public good in relation to the Metaverse (such as through technical standards groups) can incorporate non-Western based perspectives. Who could disagree? It is valuable to get into the detail of why this does not always happen though. Standards groups mostly meet and work online generating seemingly innocuous matters such as time zones, call hosting, utilitarian questions of how many people are dialling in from X region, and how well-meaning group chairs manage this complexity. The internationalist point is taken however, and I have made arguments in *Philosophy & Technology* to this effect in relation to my cross-cultural ethics work in Japan (McStay, 2021).

My paper also argued that there is a very real risk in how the Metaverse is shaping-up, particularly in relation to the digital *commons*, the latter exemplified by the open-source community that has at least partial origins in the Free Software movement, started in 1983 by Richard Stallman. My concern was, and is, about ownership of standards and protocols that may decide the nature of Metaverse experience, especially if tethered to hardware. This is in part a question about property and plutocracy. We (I and Turner) then got into Locke's (1980 [1690]) theory of property. I highlighted that Locke's theory of property is about the exertion of labour upon natural resources, asserting that resources in question for the Metaverse and surveillant physics are also about people. Critically, people are not natural resources in Locke's terms. Turner argued that it is 'virtual resources, not the digital users engaging with them, that Metaverse corporations are creating and arguably have property rights over'. Turner extends this arguing that Metaverse creators may have the right to dictate the conditions for entry to their property, meaning that there is no problem of the missing public commons.

There is perhaps some misunderstanding. My concern is not spatial, i.e., about entering property. It is protocol and standards-based, regarding the fundamental nature(s) of synthetic media. In my paper I highlighted that the original launch of the Web had the public good in mind, in that Berners-Lee and Cailliau (1990) did not commercialise or otherwise restrict their work on hypertext, addresses and languages to build and connect Web sites. This was not for lack of vision as their original proposal for the Web factored for exponential growth and interconnections between different media types. My observation was, and still is, that the Metaverse is looking like it will be something different. This is one where standards and protocols are less free, or subject to license. I have no problem with expertly built spaces and services that have a revenue model (be this a monthly plan, or something else). The commons interest is a need to protect fundamental aspects of emergent digital life. If core languages, protocols, standards, and laws of digital reality are subject to property rights, I think we have a problem.

While my key response is in relation to fundamental standards and protocols, I also add that there is no neat separation between 'virtual resources' and 'digital

users'. If the surveillant physics argument is accepted, we should acknowledge that there is a clear relationship between resources and users due to the generative nature of emerging digital culture. Indeed, an object or resource in question may not be made by a designer with JavaScript, but co-generated by proprietary algorithms, human behaviour, expression, and collectively generated online representations of objects and resources.

Turner then progresses to argue there is instead scope for *virtual abundance*, in that space is unlimited in a virtual context. There is not too much wrong in this argument in and of itself, although it is worth noting that photorealistic simulations require high-performance computing, that has a high carbon cost. Virtual abundance, for now, would have a high physical cost. Politically, if *virtual abundance* is intended as a critique, it works less well because the harms argued through surveillant physics have vector properties (they scale without loss), so abundance would offer scope for increased monopoly of laws of digital reality (not dissimilar from a network effects argument).

To end, this point about physical implications of the virtual, along with other points above, speak for need of a *through-line* that, like the Metaverse itself, does readily separate the virtual and the real. For example, while virtual realist governance serves to better account for the nature of online harms, urging those working in policy to consider that virtual is real experience, it should not be missed that the virtual experience is real because of the through-line back to a person or affected group.

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