

The Glitz and Glamour of the Metaverse

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At the heart of the metaverse stands the vision of an immersive Internet – a gigantic, unified, persistent, and shared realm.¹ To the jewellery industry, it remains to be seen as to whether this enormous virtual cyberspace is a blessing, or, in fact, as curse.

Since the expansion of the Internet in the 1990s, the cyberspace has kept evolving. We have created various computer-based environments including social networks, video conferencing, virtual 3D worlds (VR HoloLens), augmented reality applications (Pokémon Go), and Non-Fungible Token (NFT) Games (Upland). Such virtual environments have bought us various degrees of digital transformation and the term ‘metaverse’ has been coined to further reflect the digital transformation occurring in every aspect of our physical lives.

For some, there is a sense of vigilance in engaging with the metaverse and are wary of the disruption it could cause for the community.² In the virtual world there are many examples of altruism and Samaritanism, but these come with the constant presence of players bent on distraction, disruption (or even destruction) that the digital community has to deal with. Boellstorff describes this phenomenon as the dark side of the disinhibition that many people find in virtual worlds.³ Another aspect in this fluid nature of going between real and a virtual life, is that some people reside in more than one virtual world, sometimes as similar personalities, sometimes different. Sometimes they give up on one world and migrate to another.⁴ Developments in electronic communications are drastically changing what it means to be human, interacting with other humans, and for our idea of creation.⁵ Others have considered this world to have



Fig 1. Tiffany & Co. Iris Corsage Ornament.
Wikimedia Commons: Walters Art Museum.

- 1 Ashkan Yousefipour et al., ‘All one needs to know about fog computing and related edge computing paradigms: A complete survey’ (2019) 98 *Journal of Systems Architecture*.
- 2 Daniel Schackman, ‘Review Article: Exploring the new frontiers of collaborative community’ (2009) 11(5) *New Media & Society*.
- 3 *ibid.*
- 4 *ibid.*
- 5 Gianluca Mura (ed), *Metaplasticity in Virtual Worlds: Aesthetics and Semantic Concepts* (IGI Global 2011).

brought unprecedented opportunities for artists to blend every facet of our physical surroundings with digital creativity.⁶ The value of recent technological developments for artists is more than being able to become more efficient and more productive. It is also the ability to 'highlight and elevate humanness in new ways through art, even by appearing to replace the real with the virtual'.⁷ New tools don't simply replace humans, they allow human creators to shift into new realms of creation: creating dynamic systems and worlds instead of static products.⁸ This piece will challenge such perspectives, showing that the digital and physical can simultaneously work together to maintain creative freedom in both spheres.

This article will consider three different types of interactions that emerge from these digital immersive platforms in relation to the jewellery industry and explore the remarkable types of novel creations in the expanded horizons of metaverse cyberspace. Firstly, I consider the ways we can interact and experiment within this digital world. The discussion will then turn to issues of digital privacy and safety for metaverse artists and companies, bringing to light the questions around ownership of digital artworks. Then, the piece will reflect upon the origin of the metaverse itself and the effects this has on the creative freedom of artists, drawing together the material and immaterial worlds we live in.

At the outset, we consider our world to be tactile, touchable, and have a physical presence. Yet is this actually the case today, and will this be so in the near future? After all, as of January 2021, there were more than 4.5 billion active internet users worldwide, and 92.6% of them accessed this digital world via mobile devices.⁹ As such, there is an ever-growing overlap between our digital and physical lives, as we can socialise, create, and entertain ourselves through virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), or simply through an alternate realm on-screen.

Whilst terms such as 'internet', 'online', and, perhaps, 'virtual reality' are widely disseminated through society, what about the word 'metaverse'? The term has become a buzzword within the last year, and, to put it simply, it is a shared three-dimensional state in virtual reality where people can interact. To enter this digital world, you have to put on a pair of augmented or virtual reality headsets, enabling you to interact and hang out with each other via avatars, just as you would in the real world.¹⁰ What is so innovative in this computer-generated world, is that we are able to express and re-create ourselves with unparalleled creative freedom, not governed by the rules of reality. This is especially revolutionary in the jewellery space, which has already begun to intersect the physical world's real-time, spatially oriented content with this emerging and immersive digital environment.

In this context, let us first consider the ways artists can interact in this digital world. The metaverse offers the opportunity for the creation

and virtual styling of digital jewellery across a variety of devices and platforms. This could be in gaming, for example, when the heritage Japanese pearl jeweller, Tasaki, collaborated with Animal Crossing to produce a collection for game avatars; to e-commerce, like Dress X's digital accessories designed by the 3D designer Alejandro Delgado. Indeed, the metaverse has become a new space for design, as creators, artists, and consumers are able to exchange and make use of different models and creations, without any restrictions, across platforms. In this immersive world, it seems that 2021 was the year for the breakthrough of non-fungible tokens (NFTs).¹¹ This NFT market has surged exponentially, as a new study by NonFungible and L'Atelier BNP Paribas recorded sales reaching \$17.7 billion in 2021, up from \$82.5 million in 2020 — a jump of more than 200 times.¹² Being able to sell NFTs within the metaverse acts as a massive incentive for digital jewellery to be produced. Some of the biggest releases of NFTs have stemmed from digital jewellery collaborations between celebrities, including Lil Pump's 'Esskeetit Diamond VVS' collection. Available to purchase through the platform 'Sweet' in March 2021, Pump minted a total of five NFTs, each retailed for \$10,000, possible to buy securely on a first-come-first-served basis.¹³ The jewellery-themed sale, also, featured more affordable NFT cards at \$10 each. The digital drop intended to emulate the American rapper's physical jewellery, allowing fans and collectors to own a piece of his personal, multi-million-dollar jewellery collection in the digital world. According to Tom Mizzzone, the CEO of NFT trading platform 'Sweet', 'the future of rare, collectible merchandise is in the digital arena', as evidenced by the growing interest in NFTs.¹⁴ Some experts even consider NFTs could become the jeweller's best friend in the near future, as it allows them to earn money via selling NFTs for digital jewellery. Asprey's executive chairman, John Rigas, believes NFTs and jewellery are, 'a perfect match' as they 'capture everything about the product, forever, when the information is part of the blockchain', in turn bolstering the authenticity of these luxury goods.¹⁵ As such, there are increasing deliberations across the sector regarding the technological benefits of the metaverse as designers can create captivating pieces of jewellery that draw inspiration from both the physical and digital realm. Thus, the digital world has opened the door to new types of interactions and considerations of what jewellery can be.

6 Jeffrey M. Morris, 'Humanness Elevated Through its Disappearance' in Mura (n 5) 102.

7 *ibid.*

8 Microsoft Mesh (Preview) Overview' (Docs.microsoft.com, 2022) <<https://docs.microsoft.com/en-us/mesh/overview>> accessed 6 May 2022.

9 Joseph Johnson, 'Global Digital Population 2019' (Statista, 2021) <<https://www.statista.com/statistics/617136/digital-population-worldwide/>> accessed 4 May 2022.

10 John Herrman and Kellan Browning, 'Are We In A Metaverse Yet?' *The New York Times* (New York, 10 July 2021) <<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/10/style/metaverse-virtual-worlds.html>> accessed 4 May 2022.

11 A term still unfamiliar to many, the NFT is an interchangeable unit of data stored on a blockchain, a form of a digital database, that can be sold and traded. Types of NFT data units may be associated with digital files, including photos, videos, and audio. Each token is uniquely identifiable, which differs from other blockchain currencies, such as Bitcoin. These NFTs can then be 'minted', referring to the process of turning a digital file into a digital asset on the Ethereum cryptocurrency blockchain, and it is impossible to edit, modify, or delete it. It is similar to the way metal coins are minted and put into circulation, non-fungible tokens are also 'minted' after they are created to retain their value on the digital marketplace.

12 NonFungible, 'Yearly NFT Market Report 2021' (NonFungible, 2022) <<https://nonfungible.com/reports/2021/en/yearly-nft-market-report-free>> accessed 4 May 2022.

13 Minting is the process of turning a digital file into a crypto collectible or digital asset on the Ethereum Blockchain.

14 Sweet, 'Sweet Launches Broad-Scale NFT Solution For Leading Entertainment And Consumer Brands In Partnership With Bitcoin. Com' (2021) <<https://markets.businessinsider.com/news/stocks/sweet-launches-broad-scale-nft-solution-for-leading-entertainment-and-consumer-brands-in-partnership-with-bitcoin-com-1030044246>> accessed 4 May 2022.

15 Anna Tong, 'Can NFTs Work For Luxury Jewellery?' *Vogue Business* (21 June 2021) <<https://www.voguebusiness.com/technology/can-nfts-work-for-luxury-jewellery-asprey-cartier>> accessed 4 May 2022.

Market experimentation within the metaverse offers solutions to some of the biggest spectres haunting the world of jewellery. The digital space offers jewellery companies a solution to two issues: the safety of transactions and devaluation of real jewellery. The security of the digital transaction in the current financial market is enabled by blockchain technology that backs digital assets, in turn, providing a tamper-proof, digital ledger of all the information on any product. This is becoming an appealing method for securing transactions as we live in an age where hacking, spyware, and digital fraud are an ever-present threat. The second aspect that metaverse assists with is devaluation of jewellery and diamonds occurring due to fluctuation on the market. Shockingly, as soon as they leave the jeweller's shop, diamonds tend to lose value, depreciating by as much as 30-35% if they are re-sold.¹⁶ The blockchain-based diamond marketplace, Icecap, offers a solution to this issue, developing a new way of online trading as it allows the trading of NFT tokens 'without friction' while the diamonds are vaulted and insured.¹⁷ According to Icecap's CEO, Jacques Voorhees, unlike liquid assets of gold and silver, purchasing diamonds through the online platform protects these valuable assets from the long-term problem of devaluation faced in the diamond industry.¹⁸ Astonishingly, trading diamonds virtually, through platforms such as Icecap, allows their value to be retained, with investments retaining much more value. Prices of rare pieces, also, are more likely to preserve their investment price, such as the one-hundred-carat diamond necklace 'Desert Wind' which featured as part of Icecap's inaugural line of collector-quality gems in the world's first NFT diamond and jewellery collection, in May 2021.¹⁹ Even Christie's, the noted auction house, is paying close attention to the capabilities of digital assets in the metaverse. Their resident specialist Noah Davis has said, 'blockchain is on the cusp of being integrated into every single creative industry,' alluding to the strong commercial interest attached to the evolving sphere of digital jewellery.²⁰

It must be recognised, however, that there are currently no laws that govern existing trademark registrations of physical goods in the metaverse. What does this all mean for traditional Intellectual Property (IP), such as trademarks and copyrights? There are some new instances, including the lawsuit that Hermès filed against the digital artist Mason Rothschild for creating, selling, and using 'MetaBirkin' in January 2022. The 'MetaBirkin' NFTs featured the Hermès Birkin handbag design, which was allegedly used without permission and in violation of its trademark rights. The luxury fashion retailer described Rothschild as 'a digital spectator who is seeking to get rich quick' by appropriating the brand 'MetaBirkins' for the exchange of digital assets NFTs.²¹ Having said this, such cases have not yet been heard by courts. It may be that the disputed NFTs

experience drastic fluctuations in value due to negative publicity and uncertainty over the courts' decisions, but it is highly improbable for these cases to trigger a collapse of the general NFT market.²² A simple reason for this is that more big-name brands are taking their first steps into the digital realm, and for these companies, the risk of their NFTs becoming the subjects of legal actions is extremely low as they own all the IP rights related to the underlying works. No doubt, IP practitioners, legal analysts and NFT traders alike will be avidly anticipating the decisions from the U.S. courts as these judgments will help determine how these online creations will interact with long-standing intellectual property rights, such as copyrights and trademarks. Thus, if a company is thinking of expanding into the metaverse, it would be worth their while to consider filing for relevant trademarks in order to have legal protection.²³

Still, there are great possibilities for the creative industries in the metaverse. Rather than a space for division, the metaverse will make jewellery appreciation and creation more accessible. Craftsmen, designers, and clients will be able to interact in a globally immersive world without the need to journey from gemmological mines, to workshops, and commercial stores. The metaverse will, also, make for better opportunities for self-expression: we will be able to communicate our individuality by designing and later re-designing jewellery to suit our current interests, interweaving inspiration from literature, art, and even our political beliefs. Indeed, for a considerable number of artists, the metaverse creates unending possibilities in the evolution of art and design.

That said, preserving this digital blossoming of creativity is not always as straightforward as it first seems, as it has also become a stage for the expansion of corporate domination. One such artist providing insight and campaigning for the protection of public ownership in the digital sphere is Sebastian ErraZuriz. Blurring the boundaries between contemporary culture, art and technology, ErraZuriz has previously reworked Jeff Koons' augmented reality (AR) sculpture in a political stance against the 'imminent augmented reality (AR) corporate invasion', which could ultimately fuel a version of the metaverse that is limited by corporate powers of intervention and business models. This piece was titled 'Vandalized Balloon Dog', intending to act as a direct criticism of Koons Partnership with Snapchat 'which saw digital 3D versions of the artist's best-known sculptures appear in international tourists hot-spots via augmented reality'.²⁴ His latest project, an NFT start-up, Digital Diamonds Co., similarly intends to foster open innovation, focusing on promoting a new kind of diamond company. Each Digital Diamond is valued at the price of a real diamond using the Ethereum currency and has accommodated for changing pricing for bidding purposes. What is most interesting about Digital Diamonds Co. is the parallel drawn between real diamonds and the NFT creation. After all, diamonds are neither scarce, nor intrinsically precious, with their value a product of societal perception. In foresight, should artificial, lab-grown diamonds be considered to be of greater or equal significance and originality, in comparison to digital, artistic creations online? The nature of the metaverse also means that digital jewellery can sidestep issues of gemmological sourcing and occurrences of blood

16 Preeti Kulkarni, 'What You Should Keep in Mind When Investing in Diamonds' *The Economic Times* (Mumbai, 12 October 2015)

<<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/markets/commodities/what-you-should-keep-in-mind-when-investing-in-diamonds/articleshow/49297685.cms>> accessed 8 May 2022.

17 'Non-Fungible Token Hard Asset Diamond Investment | NFT Marketplace | Icecap' (Icecap, 2022) <<https://icecap.diamonds/>> accessed 6 May 2022.

18 *ibid.*

19 Jacques Voorhees, 'The World's First NFT Diamond & Jewellery Collection' (Icecap, 2021) <<https://storage.googleapis.com/icecap/CollectibleCerts/GD%20Icecap%20Catalogue%20April%202021.pdf>> accessed 4 May 2022.

20 Tong (n 15).

21 Victor Danciu, 'Not For Trademarks? The Truth About NFTs And IP' (Denemeyer, 2022) <<https://www.denemeyer.com/ip-blog/news/not-for-trademarks-the-truth-about-nfts-and-ip/>> accessed 4 May 2022.

22 *ibid.*

23 Philip Nulud, 'Protecting Your Intellectual Property In The Metaverse And On NFTs' (Lexology, 2022) <<https://www.lexology.com/library/detail.aspx?g=3458d650-8351-421f-a0ee-f1d5fbc6094>> accessed 4 May 2022.

24 Anna Codrea-Rado, 'Virtual Vandalism: Jeff Koons's 'Balloon Dog' Is Graffiti-Bombed' *The New York Times* (New York, 10 October 2017) <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/10/arts/design/augmented-reality-jeff-koons.html>> accessed 4 May 2022.

diamond mining; a desirable feature as consumers' interest in ethically sourced diamonds is growing. In light of this, the evolving digital space offers a new-found freedom to artists from the complex gem authentication systems and control of the jewellery industry.

The adoption of these immersive technologies can offer great creative freedom, without the limitations which govern our physical reality. Designers can use an unlimited array of gemstones, no longer be confined to small scale production, and can challenge the concepts of jewellery itself. Some of the largest fashion brands have begun to define their own label within this kaleidoscopic metaverse, as they, too, seek to explore it. Even the fashion house Gucci has recognised the value of the metaverse, presenting a digital display of their *haute* jewellery collection, 'Hortus Deliciarum', in 2021. The 130-piece collection is divided into four chapters, taking inspiration from the hues of an ever-changing, natural sky. Waterfalls, shooting stars, and celestial phenomena launched the first chapter's designs, while the second section took inspiration from rose gardens. The colours of the sunset informed part three, with precious gemstones, such as opal, topaz, and garnets translating the rich twilight hues of the sky to one of nightfall. These pieces have a discordant symmetry as the jewels were placed mismatched to encapsulate the ephemerality of the sky as it passes from day to night. The fourth incorporated prides of lions, roaring their way around necklaces and earrings encrusted with gemstones. I believe that launching the jewellery collection in this way would simply not have been possible if it were in physical form: it feels as though Gucci chose to present the collection through a digital platform by also believing in the aptness of the metaverse. In a conventional display, the collection would not have had the same ambiance of enchantment, which captivated me and countless others.²⁵ And now, when the fine jewellery is worn for special events and red carpets, we can be reminded of its release in a digital format. As such, even the biggest names in commercial luxury are embracing the universe of possibilities that virtual jewellery creates.

Keeping this in mind, the large-scale fashion brands designing luxury jewellery have not been the only ones to benefit from our ever-increasing connection with the metaverse. Independent artists are also able to blossom and collaborate with the creative aficionados driving the campaigns of high fashion. This is facilitated by the deregulated finance ecosystem (DeFi), which allows digital creators to sell and authenticate their NFTs without a field of experts deciding what is valuable, precious, or appealing. This helps designers, such as the New York based artist, Carol Civre, as DeFi applications give users more control over their money through personal wallets and trading services that cater to individuals. Civre's digital creations can maintain space within the world of the big fashion brands, bridging the worlds of fashion, 3D art, and CGI to create an idealised 'exaggeration of reality'.²⁶ The artist aims to transform, elevate, and explore the possibilities of the human body that may not be possible to explore in our physical lives.²⁷ Carol's innovative ways of developing digital art were key to her success and have appealed to an extensive selection of brands, with her clientele including Chanel,

Prada and Vivienne Westwood. Her work has even been described as promoting an 'E-Renaissance' in *Vogue Italia*.²⁸ This digital space has facilitated collaborations between individual and large-scale enterprises to create new forms of jewellery that transgress the digital and physical world to form a united multi-experience for the consumer. Experiences can thus start in the physical world, but then extend into an infinite realm of the digital metaverse.

It is surreal to think that we are already able to create and innovate in such an unhindered manner and in an alternative reality. It triggers a flurry of questions about what comes next in digital design. In the fashion industry, will there be a large-scale transformation with the new growth of opportunity for digital agencies, stylists, or collections, operating through the metaverse? While some companies will likely continue to operate only in the physical world, others that wish to can continue to exercise their duty in the creation of the new through digital design. With NFTs, blockchain gems, and the metaverse – jewellery is evolving beyond the physical bounds of reality, transitioning into a realm of pixels and colour. For these reasons, despite the continued process of jewellery designs serving both functions of being appreciated for its artistic qualities, as well as being an indicator of wealth, the industry is turning to digitisation to suit the future market and creative design. This is what sets the metaverse apart – the promise of infinite, artistic outcomes – and, in turn, the chance to transform the concept of jewellery in itself. On this premise, the fundamental concept of the metaverse is not to act as a way to supersede and out-do contemporary painterly, sculptural, or architectural practices so fundamental to our contemporary art practices today. Rather, it seeks to enable the blossoming of creative practices through a digital platform, in turn, preserving and connecting these two inspirational worlds.

A thought to end this essay: this creative unity could, in fact, activate a radical shift as to how we can evaluate the notion of artistic freedom. Indeed, the interactions of the physical and digital world, in the jewellery, fashion, and broader cultural sphere could result in the transformative visualisations of our world around us.

²⁵ Sarah Royce-Greensill, 'Gucci's New High Jewellery Collection Is Worthy Of A Fantastical Fairy Princess - Or Prince' *The Telegraph* (London, 21 June 2021) <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/luxury/jewellery/guccis-new-high-jewellery-collection-worthy-fantastical-fairy/>> accessed 4 May 2022.

²⁶ Claudia Luque, 'Review Of Carol Civre: An Extension Of Reality' *Metal Magazine* (2020) <<https://metalmagazine.eu/en/post/interview/carol-civre>> accessed 4 May 2022.

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ Rujana Cantoni, 'RENAISSANC-E' *Vogue Italia* (Milan, 17 July 2021) <<https://www.vogue.it/fotografia/article/renaissanc-e-by-rujana-cantoni-7-3d-artists>> accessed 4 May 2022.