

Zuckerberg's Map: An Analysis of Constitutive Metaphors in the Metaverse Announcement and Their Afterlife

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In 2021 Mark Zuckerberg publicly announced the Metaverse. He relied on an hour-long video, "The Metaverse and How We'll Build It Together," as his primary pitch deck. Zuckerberg, the main speaker throughout this video, used the constitutive power of frontier and immersion metaphors to invite audiences to join his virtual enterprise. Zuckerberg compared the Metaverse to an infinite frontier but simultaneously ignores the violent dangers historically associated with new frontiers. Similarly, Zuckerberg used immersion metaphors to market the Metaverse's realness but ignored the inherent vulnerability of being fully immersed in an alternate reality. Mapping language complements Zuckerberg's appeal to frontier language and adds cartographic, expansionist elements to his depiction of the Metaverse. Ultimately, as Zuckerberg invited audiences to become explorers and worldbuilders in the virtual frontier, he further argued that virtual worlds are as compelling as physical reality.

Keywords: Metaverse, Charland, metaphor, frontiers, immersion, constitutive rhetoric

Zuckerberg's Map: Getting Lost in the Virtual Frontier

On October 28, 2021, Mark Zuckerberg announced his new technological enterprise: the Metaverse. He simultaneously consolidated and rebranded Facebook's intellectual property under the umbrella term "Meta" and founded new technological research businesses. Various public documents and videos followed Zuckerberg's initial announcement to explain the contours of Zuckerberg's new virtual world. Across these texts, Zuckerberg invited his audience to welcome virtual reality into all aspects of life: work, school, education, gaming, and more. Because "[t]he launch of new products is often the most adequate stage for digital media corporations to narrate and frame themselves as key agents in ongoing changes," Meta's initial announcement video, "The Metaverse and How We'll Build It Together," serves as a compelling foundational document worthy of rhetorical analysis.¹ Within this video, Zuckerberg positions the Metaverse as a new frontier that users can help build. He also claims that virtual worlds are as compelling as physical reality.

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¹ Simone Natale, Paolo Bory, and Gabriele Balbi, "The Rise of Corporational Determinism: Digital Media Corporations and Narratives of Media Change," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 36, no. 4 (2019): 332.

Zuckerberg presented “The Metaverse” at Meta’s yearly Connect conference in 2021.² Consistent with other important technological advertisements, this video uses constitutive rhetoric to encourage consumer buy-in.³ Constitutive rhetoric, as Jasinski notes, encourages audience members “to experience the world in certain ways ... [and] audiences, in turn, appropriate, articulate, circulate, and/or subvert these textual forms in ways that release and transform their potential constitutive energy.”⁴ The Metaverse announcement video invites audiences to accept their role in furthering virtual reality. Zuckerberg argues that the Metaverse deserves to be incorporated into humanity’s understanding of reality and even enhances and expands this understanding. Specifically, “The Metaverse” reframes the language we used to understand virtual reality through Zuckerberg’s frontier and immersion metaphors and cartographic language.⁵

To make this argument, I first provide a framework for constitutive rhetoric in advertising, embodiment in virtual worlds, and the imaginative power of metaphors. Next, I analyze Zuckerberg’s frontier and immersion metaphors and cartographic language. Finally, I discuss the unspoken side of Zuckerberg’s metaphors, audiences’ reactions to the Metaverse’s launch, and the importance of rhetorically analyzing tech moguls’ use of language in advertisements.

Constitutive Rhetoric, Advertising, Embodiment, and Metaphor

I will adopt Charland’s understanding of constitutive rhetoric to analyze the metaphors in “The Metaverse.” By analyzing Quebec’s independence movement, Charland provides a compelling understanding of constitutive rhetoric:

What is significant in constitutive rhetoric is that it positions the reader towards political, social, and economic action in the material world and it is in this positioning that its ideological character becomes significant ... First, audience members must be successfully interpellated; not all constitutive rhetorics succeed. Second, the tautological logic of constitutive rhetoric must necessitate action in the material world; constitutive rhetoric must require that its embodied subjects act freely in the social world to affirm their subject position.⁶

Charland incorporates the material world into his definition of constitutive rhetoric; therefore, this definition applies to advertisements, which encourage tangible actions as byproducts of identification. Scholars often cite Charland while analyzing the constitutive rhetoric in political

² I’ll refer to “The Metaverse and How We’ll Build It Together” as “The Metaverse” for the rest of this paper to maintain brevity.

³ Sarah R. Stein, “The ‘1984’ Macintosh Ad: Cinematic Icons and Constitutive Rhetoric in the Launch of a New Machine,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88, no. 2 (2002): 169–192.

⁴ James Jasinski, “A Constitutive Framework for Rhetorical Historiography: Toward an Understanding of the Discursive (Re)Constitution of ‘Constitution,’ *The Federalist Papers*,” *Doing Rhetorical History: Concepts and Cases* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1998): 74.

⁵ Jasinski, “A Constitutive Framework for Rhetorical Historiography,” 78.

⁶ Maurice Charland, “Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the Peuple Québécois,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73, no. 2 (1987): 141.

messages; however, advertisements released by for-profit organizations also encourage monetary action, an inherently material(ist) activity, and can be understood through Charland's audience-centric definition of constitutive rhetoric.

To motivate monetary action, constitutive rhetoric in advertising invites audiences to adopt certain identities and perspectives. The narratives and myths found in advertisements aren't only shaped by organizations' sponsors and leaders but also by a "real consumer" who "behaves as the ideal one imagined by the persona and by the sponsor."⁷ Some advertisements explicitly describe "real consumers," thereby presenting desired outcomes to audience members who can expand these narratives. Several scholars note that in Facebook's advertising, Zuckerberg tends to create "a kind of cosmology that places the users, commercial actors, and Facebook shoulder to shoulder—a view that flattens and obfuscates the incomprehensibly large differences in power between these different players."⁸ Zuckerberg continued to equalize power differences in Metaverse advertisements by constructing "real consumers" as actively shaping the new virtual frontier on an even plane with him. Overall, advertisements challenge and compel consumers to embody the identities corresponding to the products they purchase.

Furthermore, leading technology companies are notorious for shaping cultural understandings of the past, present, and future by positing their founders as symbols of technological innovation.⁹ For instance, Zuckerberg mentioned the printing press and television in a 2012 letter to Facebook investors, essentially "re-writing the history of digital media in line with [his] corporate narratives."¹⁰ Not only did Zuckerberg recall the past to establish credibility, but he also invited audiences to recognize big tech organizations as the primary drivers of technological innovation. Zuckerberg made a similar move in "The Metaverse" by mentioning the internet, mobile phones with cameras, and even the initial launch of Facebook as defining "[t]he basic story of technology in our lifetimes" and giving us "the power to express ourselves."¹¹ Additionally, technology companies "present themselves as capable to respond to emerging social needs by changing the world with new and revolutionary ideas."¹² Meta and companies such as Apple and Tesla continue to present themselves as active agents in solving the world's problems through technology. Big tech companies provide compelling visions of the future for audience members to consider—for instance, Amazon's anticipatory shipping or Meta's virtual world where everyone can connect despite physical boundaries. Often at the center of these narratives are recognizable CEOs, who serve as mascots for their organizations' ideal world. The constitutive rhetoric used by technology companies invites audience members to consider certain identities *and* beliefs about technology's role in the past, present, and future.

Stein effectively uses Charland's understanding of constitutive rhetoric to analyze the narratives in the infamous Macintosh "1984" advertisement.¹³ Similar studies explore

⁷ Barbara B. Stern, "A Revised Communication Model for Advertising: Multiple Dimensions of the Source, the Message, and the Recipient," *Journal of Advertising* 23, no. 2 (1994): 13.

⁸ Anna Lauren Hoffman, Nicholas Proferes, and Michael Zimmer, "'Making the World More Open and Connected': Mark Zuckerberg and the Discursive Construction of Facebook and Its Users," *New Media & Society* 20, no. 1 (2018): 214.

⁹ Natale, Bory, and Balbi, "The Rise of Corporational Determinism."

¹⁰ Natale, Bory, and Balbi, "The Rise of Corporational Determinism," 330.

¹¹ Meta, "The Metaverse and How We'll Build It Together – Connect 2021," YouTube, 2021.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uvufun6xer8&list=PLKdbWuZ2pbLXHXry-UpTrcumLw6u7YJOH>.

¹² Natale, Bory, and Balbi, "The Rise of Corporational Determinism," 331.

¹³ Stein, "The '1984' Macintosh Ad."

constitutive rhetoric in AncestryDNA, Apple, Nike, and Harley-Davidson advertisements.¹⁴ Stein's work is more relevant to my argument because it investigates a significant moment in technological advancement. Charland's understanding of constitutive rhetoric and Stein's application of Charland to advertisements will serve as my framework to understand the use of constitutive rhetoric in "The Metaverse."

The "1984" advertisement, like "The Metaverse," announced a new, revolutionary tech product. At the time, the "1984" advertisement successfully told a compelling narrative but failed to convert the masses into Macintosh supporters. Regardless, pre-existing Macintosh fans were willing to constitute the values present in the "1984" advertisement—that of "revolutionaries, cast into the marketplace to realize their subjectivity as warriors in the crusade for the freedom of information."¹⁵ "The Metaverse" isn't as explicitly plot-driven but, like all advertisements, argues for audience members to take part in its product's values. "The Metaverse" casts users as fearless pioneers who will overlay the virtual world onto the physical. Essentially, this video encourages audience members to accept a new sphere of reality as meaningful, and Zuckerberg used attitudes of Western expansion and embodied experiences to appeal to his audience.

Clear definitions of bodily experiences—within physical and virtual reality—are necessary to productively analyze Metaverse advertising, which often mentions augmented reality and virtual avatars. Experiences in the physical world fall within the embodied cognition, or body-subject, approach, "in which the body is understood as the medium that humans use for having a world"; cognition is directly influenced by what the body encounters.¹⁶ The body and mind's interaction with the visual and auditory elements of traditional media, such as movies and video games, is often understood through Cartesian Dualism. In Cartesian Dualism, "the mind travels, the body stays"; however, as argued by Aymerich-Franch, Cartesian Dualism falls short of explaining the body in virtual reality because it doesn't fully encapsulate immersive, sensorial experiences.¹⁷

Though current Metaverse technology focuses on visual and auditory elements, "The Metaverse" contends that a fully realized Metaverse will include displays, audio, input, haptics, hand tracking, eye tracking, and mixed reality. This fully realized Metaverse will create an embodied experience rather than embodied cognition, or a "Cartesian privileging of the eye and mind" over bodily experiences.¹⁸ Aymerich-Franch defines mediated embodiment as "the technologically induced illusion of adopting an artificial body in which one perceives to be located."¹⁹ A mediated embodiment has remarkable implications for what people believe constitutes reality.

¹⁴ Angela L. Putman and Kristen L. Cole, "All Hail DNA: The Constitutive Rhetoric of AncestryDNA™ Advertising," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 37, no. 3 (2020): 207–20; Ana Kilambi, Michel Laroche, and Marie-Odile Richard, "Constitutive Marketing: Towards Understanding Brand Community Formation," *International Journal of Advertising* 32, no. 1 (2013): 45–64.

¹⁵ Stein, "The '1984' Macintosh Ad," 188.

¹⁶ Laura Aymerich-Franch, "Mediated Embodiment in New Communication Technologies," *Advanced Methodologies and Technologies in Artificial Intelligence, Computer Simulation, and Human-Computer Interaction*, edited by Mehdi Khosrow-Pour, D.B.A., (Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 2019), 564.

¹⁷ Aymerich-Franch, "Mediated Embodiment," 564.

¹⁸ Frances Dyson, "Wireless Affections: Embodiment and Emotions in New Media/Theory and Art," *Convergence* 11, no. 4 (2005): 86.

¹⁹ Aymerich-Franch, "Mediated Embodiment," 566.

Zuckerberg highlights the availability of bodily experiences in the Metaverse by heavily relying on frontier and immersion metaphors. According to Osborn, a metaphor is psychological *and* rhetorical:

As response, it is an interaction of two thoughts, or interpretants, one of which springs from the stimulus sign's usual denotation, the other from its special application in the given context. This interaction of interpretants provides the basis for the stimulus–response cycle that is metaphor.²⁰

Rhetorical metaphors are powerful because they appeal to the imagination of audiences, so “then the test of mythic, imaginative rhetoric is its authenticity, whether it convinces listeners that it articulates their identity.”²¹ Thus, using rhetorical metaphors can lead the imagination of audiences to constitute or deny a specific set of values and ideas. In “The Metaverse,” Zuckerberg presents Meta users as innovative “frontiersmen” embarking on an unprecedented virtual journey, and the viewer must decide to accept or reject this identity.²² Accordingly, rhetorical metaphors are a powerful tool that can advance constitutive rhetoric.

Welcome to the Metaverse: Metaphors of Expansion and Immersion

“The Metaverse” begins with a pan that reveals Mark Zuckerberg sitting in a casual yet expensive-looking living room.²³ Within sixty seconds, Zuckerberg mentioned the term “embodiment” in his pitch about technology’s future. He stated Meta will be “an embodied internet where you’re in the experience, not just looking at it.”²⁴ Zuckerberg provided frontier and immersion metaphors and eventually uses cartographic language to map out the virtual realm and to argue that the Metaverse is a constructive addition to human experience. Through Zuckerberg’s metaphors and their subliminal meanings, the audience’s imagination is led to believe that the Metaverse is an unprecedented and positive innovation. However, underneath the surface of these metaphors are complex undertones of Western expansion and the promotion of new spheres of reality. In the following sections, I will conduct a close reading of “The Metaverse” and examine the implications of Zuckerberg’s metaphors.

“Beyond” Our Present Frontier

Zuckerberg evoked classical Greece by choosing the name “meta,” which means “beyond” in Greek. He stated, “[Meta] symbolizes that there is always more to build ... there’s always a next chapter to the story.”²⁵ He reminded the audience about the history of technological progression

²⁰ Michael Osborn, “The Metaphor in Public Address,” in *Michael Osborn on Metaphor and Style*, Rhetoric and Public Affairs Series (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2018).

²¹ Michael Osborn, “Epilogue: The Chase,” in *Michael Osborn on Metaphor and Style*, Rhetoric and Public Affairs Series (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2018).

²² I employ the use of “frontiersmen” instead of “frontierspeople” because the American frontier myth is highly masculinized.

²³ Meta, “The Metaverse and How We’ll Build It Together.”

²⁴ Meta, “The Metaverse and How We’ll Build It Together.”

²⁵ Meta, “The Metaverse and How We’ll Build It Together.”

in the past twenty years, a timeline heavily influenced by Zuckerberg. First, the internet made an information economy possible. Then, social media changed how we interact and relate to one another. Finally, the Metaverse will mark a new age, or the “next frontier.”²⁶ Zuckerberg also emphasized the Metaverse’s “thousands of still-to-be imagined uses” to excite audiences who want to blaze new virtual trails.²⁷

The concept of frontiers, or “[t]he existence of an area of free land,” is pervasive throughout American history.²⁸ In brief, the founding of the first American colonies, the subsequent Westward expansion, and the brutal violence committed against Native Americans and enslaved people defined the initial centuries of American history. As early as 1893, however, the availability of new frontiers in North America was diminishing. Even with the decline in “free land,” the American impulse to expand persisted. As Frederick Jackson Turner famously argued, the frontier defined the American national experience:

He would be a rash prophet who should assert that the expansive character of American life has now entirely ceased. Movement has been its dominant fact, and, unless this training has no effect upon a people, the American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise. But never again will such gifts of free land offer themselves.²⁹

Essentially, the American tradition of expansion created a proclivity for perpetual motion that many Americans still cannot escape. The traits of the frontier—that “coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness ... that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil ... that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom”—are also woven into the fabric of American identity.³⁰ Though territorial frontiers no longer offer themselves, the American impulse to expand manifests itself in many forms, such as commerce, academic excellence, or, more recently, technology.

Zuckerberg’s use of frontier language is strategic because the “symbol of the frontier is pervasive in American culture” and therefore conjures peripheral assumptions and emotions of Western audiences.³¹ In her book *On the Frontier of Science*, Ceccarelli discussed how scientists have used the frontier metaphor for nonspatial subjects, primarily the intellectual enterprises of science. From genomics to stem cell research, rhetors in the United States have applied the frontier metaphor to nonspatial territories; therefore, Zuckerberg’s use of this metaphor is hardly surprising. Furthermore, selecting Zuckerberg as the main speaker in “The Metaverse” was strategic; his public reputation as a ruthless Silicon Valley entrepreneur mimics the typical profiles of pioneers from the past: “individualistic, authority-averse archetypes of virile white masculinity—coarse, competitive, and isolated from a fearful public.”³² As the leader of this new

²⁶ Meta, “The Metaverse and How We’ll Build It Together.”

²⁷ Patricia Nelson Limerick, “The Adventures of the Frontier in the Twentieth Century,” in *The Frontier in American Culture*, edited by James R. Grossman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 67.

²⁸ Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” a paper read at the meeting of the American Historical Association in Chicago, 12 July 1893, during the World Columbian Exposition (1893), 1.

²⁹ Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” 9.

³⁰ Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” 9.

³¹ Leah Ceccarelli, *On the Frontier of Science: An American Rhetoric of Exploration and Exploitation* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013), 2.

³² Ceccarelli, *On the Frontier of Science*, 30.

frontier, Zuckerberg recognizes that he needs people willing to embark on this journey with him. To encourage a large enough band of followers to trek across the digital desert, he emphasized the importance of presence, which is made possible through immersive experiences.

Zuckerberg assured his audiences that they can expand their influence in this frontier by depicting the digital as an inhabitable realm and a new sphere of reality, which appeals to the opportunistic ideals of Western audiences. Zuckerberg articulated the digital frontier as layers of virtual and augmented reality: “[y]ou can start to see how the Metaverse is going to enable richer experiences, by letting us add new layers to the world that we can interact with.”³³ By labeling the virtual world as inhabitable, Zuckerberg appealed to embodied experiences and keeps the spirit of Western expansion alive.

Settlers of the Metaverse participate in movement from one frontier to the next by bringing the physical world into the Metaverse and creating new things in the digital world. Zuckerberg carefully distinguishes between virtual and augmented reality, noting that the difference has to do with the physical:

You’re going to be able to move across these different experiences on all kinds of different devices ... sometimes using augmented reality glasses so you can be present in the *physical* world as well, and sometimes on a computer or phone so you can quickly jump into the metaverse from existing platforms.³⁴

Thus, the digital competes with the physical. The Metaverse is pining for the presence of its users—us—in its frontier and even encourages us to bring something from our old frontier. After speaking with Zuckerberg, one speaker declared, “[t]hat’s it, Mark. I’m moving to the Metaverse.”³⁵

Virtual Reality as Immersion

Immersion metaphors in Western cultures are “derived from the physical experience of being submerged in water.”³⁶ From biblical texts to medieval poetry to contemporary rhetoricians, water holds various meanings. When humanity didn’t have the technology available to navigate the ocean, the sea was illustrated throughout literature as a violent, powerful threat. As technology made safe and reliable oceanic exploration possible, the sea became “by a process of cultural conditioning ... a place of adventure where mighty and brave and profitable deeds might be performed.”³⁷ Just as understandings of the sea have evolved, so have attitudes surrounding digital frontiers. Since the dawn of science fiction literature, authors have investigated and criticized digital spaces. “Pygmalion’s Spectacles” is one of the earliest short stories that explores how illusions can make people question reality. More recently, *Ready Player One* and *Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow* reveal the dangers of getting lost in the digital but highlight the potential for deep relationships and powerful stories in virtual realms. The virtual

³³ Meta, “The Metaverse and How We’ll Build It Together.”

³⁴ Meta, “The Metaverse and How We’ll Build It Together.”

³⁵ Meta, “The Metaverse and How We’ll Build It Together.”

³⁶ Janet Horowitz Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 98.

³⁷ Osborn, “The Evolution of the Archetypal Sea,” 347.

realm was once regarded as elusive as the sea but, as technology has advanced, has become a frontier full of economic promise and intellectual intrigue.

“Frontiersmen” akin to Zuckerberg typically use immersion metaphors to persuade users to accept the digital frontier as a new sphere of reality. In exploring digital media, Murray claims:

We seek the same feeling from a psychologically immersive experience that we do from a plunge in the ocean or swimming pool: the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality, as different as water is from air, that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus.³⁸

The interplay of an immersion metaphor and its tie to water can reveal rich meanings behind Zuckerberg's language regarding presence and embodiment. The feeling of presence is shaped by the circumstances to which we direct the most attention. According to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, “[i]t is not enough indeed that a thing should exist for a person to feel its presence.”³⁹ Instead of employing verbal magic, the Metaverse presents a convincing plunge into the unreal through “displays, audio, input, haptics, hand tracking, eye tracking, mixed reality, sensors, graphics, computer vision, avatars, perceptual science, AI, and more.”⁴⁰ Screens and keyboards will no longer rule our use of technology; instead, the Metaverse will provide a fully immersive experience powerful enough to conjure a “deep feeling of presence.”⁴¹

Within the realm of increasing or decreasing feelings of presence are the issues of confusing “fidelity to reality.”⁴² The physical ocean is arguably a completely embodied experience—almost every sense is engaged, which brings a sense of presence to the submersed person. However, a fully realized Metaverse could also provide a full-body experience in the virtual world as convincing as the physical ocean. By appealing to experiences of embodiment within his metaphors, Zuckerberg invited audiences to dive into the virtual waters of the Metaverse and to accept mediated embodiment as an important sphere of reality.

Consequently, experiences in the Metaverse interact with bodies, and humanity's “most fundamental meanings are those that grow out of [their] bodily experience as it interacts with [their] environment.”⁴³ Because humans derive so much meaning from embodied experiences that “evoke visceral responses that can constrain perceptions, conceptions, and reflections of reality,” immersion metaphors that appeal to embodiment warrant close rhetorical readings.⁴⁴ For instance, the Metaverse video contains a scene about remote work: “[y]ou could be at the office without the commute. You would still have that sense of presence ... Shared physical space. Those chance interactions that make your day. All accessible from anywhere.”⁴⁵ By appealing to

³⁸ Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 98.

³⁹ Chaïm Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, “Presentation of Data and Form of the Discourse,” *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, translated by John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), 117.

⁴⁰ Meta, “The Metaverse and How We’ll Build It Together.”

⁴¹ Meta, “The Metaverse and How We’ll Build It Together.”

⁴² Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, “Presentation of Data and Form of the Discourse,” 118.

⁴³ Richard B. Gregg, “Embodied Meaning in American Public Discourse During the Cold War,” *Metaphorical World Politics*, edited by Francis A. Beer and Christ’l De Landtsheer (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2004), 61.

⁴⁴ Gregg, “Embodied Meaning in American Public Discourse During the Cold War,” 62.

⁴⁵ Meta, “The Metaverse and How We’ll Build It Together.”

physical and emotional experiences and asserting that humans will be just as present in the virtual world, Zuckerberg subliminally argues that the Metaverse could become just as meaningful as the physical world.⁴⁶ Ironically, this argument suggests that the Metaverse can be read as an inverted invader—by abandoning the physical frontier and surrendering to mediated embodiment, we allow the digital to invade our physical existence. “Frontiersmen” who explore new frontiers simultaneously invite the frontier to shape their identities and values during their journey, which ultimately informs long-lasting cultural principles. When Metaverse users invite the virtual into the physical world or fully enter the virtual world, these users allow an inverted colonization of their sense of embodiment and understanding of reality.

Drawing a Map of the New Virtual Frontier

Pioneers inevitably map newly uncovered terrain, and Zuckerberg conceptualizes the Metaverse as an infinite frontier that can draw anyone and anything nearer. Zuckerberg uniquely positions bodies in the Metaverse in both space and time, which establishes the cartographic domains of the digital world. Following his idea to juxtapose virtual layers onto the physical realm, Zuckerberg locates us within the digital, even though we remain physically present in the material world. Though “The Metaverse” never displays an actual image of a map, “[m]aps are way too abstract to be portrayals or images,” so language can figuratively provide a map.⁴⁷ By nature, a map is rhetorical because it “does not simply represent the world; it produces the world ... by making propositions that are placed in the space of the map.”⁴⁸ Furthermore, every map suggests a certain view of the world.⁴⁹ Zuckerberg’s language-based map proposes that physical location doesn’t determine *being* somewhere.

In one poignant scene of “The Metaverse,” two women, separated by physical space, engage in conversation. One woman is at a concert, and the other is in her living room. Presumably, the two women have a considerable physical distance between them. The scene is compelling because almost any viewer can relate to the feeling of separation and the desire to be closer to someone. Zuckerberg proposed the Metaverse as a solution: “[i]magine your best friend is at a concert somewhere across the world. What if you could be there with her?”⁵⁰ As the two friends talk through the Metaverse, a hologram of the woman in her living room arrives right next to the woman at the concert. The woman at the concert rejoices, “You’re here!”⁵¹ But where is *here*? In the map of the Metaverse, *being* somewhere is entirely decided by a Metaverse user. Ultimately, the map of the Metaverse proposes that we can be anywhere at any time, which makes a sense of presence entirely dependent on the user’s choice.

The map of the Metaverse also includes a dimension of time, which erases another layer of distance between people. Zuckerberg again invited his audience to imagine: “[w]hat if you could learn about anything in the world just by bringing it closer to you? In the Metaverse, you’ll be

⁴⁶ Gregg, “Embodied Meaning in American Public Discourse During the Cold War,” 61.

⁴⁷ John Krygier and Denis Wood, “Ce n’est pas le monde (This is not the world),” in *Rethinking Maps: New Frontiers in Cartographic Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 183.

⁴⁸ Rob Kitchin, Chris Perkins, and Martin Dodge, “Thinking About Maps,” in *Rethinking Maps: New Frontiers in Cartographic Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 13.

⁴⁹ Krygier and Wood, “Ce n’est pas le monde.”

⁵⁰ Meta, “The Metaverse and How We’ll Build It Together.”

⁵¹ Meta, “The Metaverse and How We’ll Build It Together.”

able to teleport not just to any place, but any time as well.”⁵² This sentiment is supplemented by scenes of students walking through a virtual representation of ancient Rome. These visual representations of historical periods and the physical world become a posting on the Metaverse map. And “[o]nce posted, the *this* takes on *thereness*, a quality of being *somewhere*, as the *there* takes on *thisness*, a quality of being something.”⁵³ Yet again, Zuckerberg interpolated the virtual onto the physical and impels his audience to view virtual experiences as equally significant to experiences in the physical world.

The Dark Side of Zuckerberg's Metaverse Metaphors

Zuckerberg's immersion and frontier metaphors contain contrasting characteristics, and Zuckerberg chose to highlight only the positive elements of each. To begin with the frontier metaphor, Ceccarelli stated, “the characterization of science as frontier exploration is a rhetorical screen, filtering out some aspects of science while highlighting others.”⁵⁴ Limerick's analysis of Disneyland's Frontierland exhibit illustrates how the frontier metaphor can be romanticized in fantastical environments without acknowledging the dangers of frontier living. The main aspect of the frontier metaphor that Zuckerberg ignored is the possibility of “wounds and injuries ... a taken-for-granted dimension of frontier life.”⁵⁵ Additionally, throughout American history, “the frontier came with two sides, the Anglo-American side and the one labeled ‘the other side of the frontier.’”⁵⁶ The other side of the digital frontier—namely, the unpredictable and dangerous veil of artificial intelligence and latent space—is left unexplored by Zuckerberg. A new frontier isn't completely positive, as Zuckerberg would like his audience to believe. New frontiers inherently indicate a sense of alienness, and settlers must learn to tame and conquer the strange new world to their liking. In this way, frontiers inspire humans to engage in violence, competition, and excavation to bend the frontier—and its inhabitants—to their will.

Immersion metaphors, however, suggest that humans must surrender and adapt to an all-powerful force. As Osborn discusses the evolution of immersion metaphors about the sea, he astutely recognizes that the ocean has “two separate patterns of meaning.”⁵⁷ One of these meanings acknowledges the sea's murderous, violent powers. This reality is muted “[w]hen the sailing vessel gave way to the steamer, the world of the machine invaded even the sea ... Man now rules – or *thinks he rules* – the briny deep.”⁵⁸ Similarly, Zuckerberg provided audiences with the false notion that immersive virtual experiences are controllable.

Frontier and immersion metaphors have contrasting implications. However, when combined, they hold the truth of the Metaverse—we can shape virtual worlds, but we'll also be shaped by these worlds in unpredictable ways. Zuckerberg focused on establishing a compelling blueprint for his new frontier through cartographic language. However, many audiences implicitly

⁵² Meta, “The Metaverse and How We'll Build It Together.”

⁵³ Krygier and Wood, “Ce n'est pas le monde (This is not the world),” 123.

⁵⁴ Ceccarelli, *On the Frontier of Science*, 51.

⁵⁵ Limerick, “The Adventures of the Frontier in the Twentieth Century,” 70.

⁵⁶ Limerick, “The Adventures of the Frontier in the Twentieth Century,” 73.

⁵⁷ Michael Osborn, “The Evolution of the Archetypal Sea in Rhetoric and Poetic,” *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 63, no. 4 (1977): 347.

⁵⁸ Osborn, “The Evolution of the Archetypal Sea in Rhetoric and Poetic,” 362.

experience the dissonance of and express their distaste for the Metaverse. Despite these dissenting audience members, many people also find immersive virtual frontiers compelling.

Reality and Its Discontents

Many scholars have pondered the appeal of virtual experiences. Chief among them is Gelernter, who provided the term “mirror worlds” to help understand digital spaces.⁵⁹ Though he focused on software, Gelernter’s definition of mirror worlds eerily echoes the current aims of virtual reality. Mirror worlds are:

Software models of some chunk of reality, some piece of the *real world* going on outside your window. Oceans of information pour endlessly into the model ... so much information that *the model* can mimic *the reality’s* every move, moment-by-moment.⁶⁰

Like Zuckerberg’s recall of social media’s history in his Metaverse pitch, Gelernter explained the period from the Industrial Revolution to 1991; what sets these two periods apart will ultimately come in the form of mirror worlds. Instead of supporting the immediate move forward in the name of Western expansion, Gelernter cautioned that “[a] software revolution will change the way society’s business is conducted, and it will change the intellectual landscape.”⁶¹ Though Gelernter’s views and knowledge surrounding software were dated in the nineties, his philosophical ideas transfer well to the Metaverse and the rhetorical patterns identified above.

The audiences that are excited about the Metaverse aren’t merely missing the undertones of Zuckerberg’s rhetoric. These audiences have every right to be intrigued by a virtual world. As Gelernter suggests, mirror worlds are just microcosms of reality. Microcosms are alluring because:

[They are] like ensembles, so pervasive and varied and strongly colored, dressed up in some many radically different ways, that you wonder (naturally) how important the shared essence under the wrappings could really be.⁶²

The fascination with microcosms, such as those in the Metaverse, is twofold. For one, turning physical reality’s vastness into a smaller model heightens its intensity so it can be experienced more vividly.⁶³ The second reason is reminiscent of Ceccarelli’s description of “frontiersman”—building virtual reality helps people find topsight. Topsight is the sense of understanding a thing’s totality, and “[w]hen you’ve achieved topsight you are, yes, looking *down* at something. You hold it in the palm of your hand.”⁶⁴ Pursuing topsight “is intellectually compelling because

⁵⁹ David Hillel Gelernter, *Mirror Worlds, or, The Day Software Puts the Universe in a Shoebox: How It Will Happen and What It Will Mean* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁶⁰ Gelernter, *Mirror Worlds*, 3.

⁶¹ Gelernter, *Mirror Worlds*, 8.

⁶² Gelernter, *Mirror Worlds*, 181.

⁶³ Gelernter, *Mirror Worlds*, 183.

⁶⁴ Gelernter, *Mirror Worlds*, 183–184.

it is *emotionally* compelling,” which explains the West’s obsession with constantly expanding its frontier.⁶⁵

The desire to explore human potential and to achieve topsight is evident in Zuckerberg’s language about mapping a new frontier and immersing ourselves in a new world. Many individuals find this desire and this language compelling. For instance, by using social media to take the pulse of public opinion, some LinkedIn users are eager to blaze new paths in the digital world. Meanwhile, others remain hesitant to embrace the Metaverse and claim it isn’t *real*. Jack Kelly, CEO and founder of two companies, quickly endorsed virtual workspaces after “The Metaverse” was published:

Meta, formerly known as Facebook, has led the charge to create, build and grow a brave new world ... While Zuckerberg may make you think that it’s all his, the territory is wide open ... It’s predicted that the metaverse will be the next revolutionary transformative phase of the internet.⁶⁶

This post clearly duplicates Zuckerberg’s frontier metaphor, and Kelly encouraged people to embrace their alternative life in the Metaverse. Kelly, like Zuckerberg, wanted users to claim their corners of the “wide open” digital frontier; he is a model of the Metaverse’s “real consumer,” who embodies the values and worldviews espoused by Zuckerberg.⁶⁷ Many comments under Kelly’s post agree with his mindset, but not everyone can focus on the bright side of these metaphors. One poignant challenger, Diego Bravo de Urquia, said:

[T]oday in the non-metaverse I spent a few hours in actual physical proximity (hugs and kisses included!) with a cousin and wife ... in the Metaverse they don’t have tomatoes with tuna ... cheesecake, and coffee like they do in real life Madrid.⁶⁸

Urquia rejects Zuckerberg’s desire to map the new frontier over the physical world because this new frontier lacks so many elements that provide meaning to the human experience and anchor us in the *real* rather than *mirrors* of the real.

These two commenters don’t represent every reaction to Zuckerberg’s rhetoric, but they help us understand why some embrace the Metaverse and some reject it. Beyond the elusive and contradictory nature of Zuckerberg’s metaphors and the cartographic language he used to illustrate the Metaverse’s four-dimensional map, there’s a valid concern that Zuckerberg and the Metaverse have misunderstood what humans value as constituting reality. In his final appeal to the audience, Zuckerberg said:

I’m proud of what we’ve built so far and excited about what comes next – as we move beyond what’s possible today, beyond the constraints of screens, beyond the limits of distance and physics ... It’s a future that is beyond any one company that will be made by all of us ... And if this is the future that you want to see, then I hope

⁶⁵ Gelernter, *Mirror Worlds*, 184.

⁶⁶ Jack Kelly, “Remote Work, Job Interviews, Business Meetings And Live Events Will All Be Conducted On The Metaverse In The Near Future,” LinkedIn post, 2021.

⁶⁷ Stern, “A Revised Communication Model for Advertising,” 13.

⁶⁸ Diego Bravo de Urquia, “Remote Work, Job Interviews, Business Meetings And Live Events Will All Be Conducted On The Metaverse In The Near Future,” LinkedIn comment, 2021.

that you will join us. Because the future is going to be beyond anything we can imagine.⁶⁹

Zuckerberg's language created a communal identity—a certain way of being and viewing the past, present, and future—that his audience can choose to inhabit.⁷⁰ Even the video's title claims that Metaverse users will build the virtual realm together, and this sentiment is reinforced throughout the video.⁷¹ Zuckerberg argued that Metaverse users are participating in discovery and technological innovation; these users are pioneering the new frontier and traversing unmapped virtual tides. Zuckerberg ultimately invited viewers to participate and perform his frontier and immersion metaphors. Becoming a “frontiersman” alongside Zuckerberg is a compelling image for individuals familiar with and supportive of continued Western expansion.

Regarding language, “there is no neutral choice – but there is a choice that appears neutral ... What term is neutral clearly depends on the environment.”⁷² A close reading of “The Metaverse” reveals metaphors steeped in attitudes of Western expansion and dominance. While “The Metaverse” seems politically neutral and primarily concerned with innovation, Zuckerberg's disregard for the dark sides of frontier and immersion metaphors can cause audiences to overlook how immersive virtual frontiers shape us as much as we shape them.

Conclusion: The Metaverse Lives On

I have focused on one major text published by a leader in technological innovation. The rich meanings derived from this analysis suggest the increasing importance of rhetorically analyzing tech moguls' use of language. Zuckerberg is only one of many billionaires concerned with new frontiers—consider Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos' fascination with space exploration—so he shouldn't be the only individual placed under a microscope. Statements published by tech moguls, especially given their growing wealth and political influence, need to be rhetorically analyzed; this paper provides a framework for analyzing statements from tech moguls who combine Western-centric metaphors with appeals to embodied experiences.

The topic only grows more relevant. Public approval of figures such as Zuckerberg is declining, as seen in the Senate's child-safety hearings with CEOs from leading social media sites. Additionally, reports of violent virtual attacks in the Metaverse and their “profound psychological impact similar to real-life attacks” highlight the current lack of control and regulations in Zuckerberg's virtual frontier.⁷³ New augmented reality products, such as the Apple Vision Pro and their corresponding advertisements, also provide new rhetoric for integrating virtual spaces into physical spaces.

Though Zuckerberg recently expanded his ventures to include artificial intelligence, he continues to build the Metaverse and find ways to juxtapose artificial spaces with physical

⁶⁹ Meta, “The Metaverse and How We'll Build It Together.”

⁷⁰ Charland, “Constitutive Rhetoric,” 133–150.

⁷¹ Meta, “The Metaverse and How We'll Build It Together.”

⁷² Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, “Presentation of Data and Form of the Discourse,” 149.

⁷³ Naomi Nix, “Attacks in the Metaverse are booming. Police are starting to pay attention,” *The Washington Post*, 2024.

reality.⁷⁴ In a 2023 video interview, Zuckerberg and Lex Fridman's Metaverse avatars spoke about artificial intelligence and the Metaverse. The realism of their avatars inspired Fridman to remark, "it feels like we're in the same room. This is really the most incredible thing I've ever seen."⁷⁵ During the interview, Zuckerberg acknowledged that the human experience is inherently physical, saying that the Metaverse is "not just about having the immersive expression of the digital world ... [but] being able to really natively bring that together" with the physical.⁷⁶ Zuckerberg also admitted his belief that "the *real* world is this mix of the physical and the digital."⁷⁷ Thus, the sentiment of immersion in digital worlds persists in Zuckerberg's rhetoric and continues to be a selling point for users.

Though many reporters claim that Zuckerberg abandoned the Metaverse project, Zuckerberg continues to develop his map of the Metaverse and add new layers consistent with the rhetoric of "The Metaverse." Zuckerberg's focus on artificial intelligence ties into the Metaverse and topics of embodiment. As reported by Alex Heath for *The Verge*, Zuckerberg views AI and virtual worlds as complementary and "sees a future in which virtual worlds are generated by AI and filled with AI characters that accompany real people."⁷⁸ While "The Metaverse" contained the most explicit uses of frontier rhetoric, it's evident that Zuckerberg intends to expand his frontiers—whether through virtual reality or open-source AI—and desires a mass exodus of willing "frontiersmen."

While American pop culture finds itself in "a postcolonial transnational context ... [where] the metaphoric alignment of science and the American frontier myth can be especially problematic," the metaphor is still compelling to many audiences.⁷⁹ Additionally, the idea of fully immersive virtual experiences attracts audiences just as the sea once did because this idea appeals to "[t]error, a yearning for freedom, the need for security, the hankering after the exotic and mysterious, [which] all remain insistent forces within human behavior."⁸⁰ With Zuckerberg's selective cartography, which draws a map that fails to mention the dangerous terrain inherent to new frontiers and uncharted waters, audiences must be astute to rhetorically discern between Zuckerberg's optimism and the reality of a fully realized Metaverse.

⁷⁴ Alex Heath, "Mark Zuckerberg's New Goal is Creating Artificial General Intelligence," *The Verge*, 2024, <https://www.theverge.com/2024/1/18/24042354/mark-zuckerberg-meta-agi-reorg-interview>.

⁷⁵ Lex Fridman, "Mark Zuckerberg: First Interview in the Metaverse," Lex Fridman Podcast, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MVYrJJNdrEg>.

⁷⁶ Fridman, "Mark Zuckerberg: First Interview in the Metaverse," 2023.

⁷⁷ Fridman, "Mark Zuckerberg: First Interview in the Metaverse," 2023.

⁷⁸ Heath, "Mark Zuckerberg's New Goal is Creating Artificial General Intelligence."

⁷⁹ Ceccarelli, *On the Frontier of Science*, 70.

⁸⁰ Osborn, "The Evolution of the Archetypal Sea," 362.