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On the Disappearance of the Metaverse: Three Scenarios for the Future

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Three Scenarios for the Future

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Over the last few years, the Metaverse, a virtual reality (VR)-based interconnected digital realm for socializing, working, and engaging in various activities, has garnered substantial interest, as evidenced by considerable investments of companies such as Meta, Microsoft, or Apple. Yet, the ultimate success of the Metaverse remains uncertain and a vivid discussion about technical challenges, vague use cases, ethical considerations, and lacking widespread adoption, exists. We add to this discussion by revisiting Marc Weiser's 1991 forward-thinking article "*The Computer for the 21st Century*" that described the vision of ubiquitous computing, which we believe still offers valuable insights. The goal of ubiquitous computing is the development of technologies that "disappear" as they "weave themselves into the fabric of everyday life". In contrast, VR is "most diametrically opposed" to this vision because it depends upon obstructive hardware and "focuses an enormous apparatus on simulating the world rather than on invisibly enhancing the world that already exists". Thus, Weiser concluded that requiring constant attention instead of reducing cognitive strain prohibits VR from becoming an indistinguishable part of everyday life.

Now, what does this mean for the future of the Metaverse? We sketch three scenarios for its future: (1) The Metaverse with its current focus of creating virtual realities where humans spend a considerable part of their time will fail. There may be specialized use cases for VR, but it will never be a profound part of the everyday life. (2) Hard- and software continue to improve. The discrepancy between the usefulness of simulated worlds and efforts of usage will shrink enough for the Metaverse to become a truly indispensable technology. (3) The focus of the Metaverse will switch from VR to augmented and mixed reality approaches that are less dissociative from human reality and therefore fuse better with the quotidian. Thus, it is closer to the concept of "embodied virtuality" that focuses on embedding computing in the physical reality instead of implanting humans in a simulated computed reality. This concept promotes computers that unobtrusively enrich various facets of life that require less attention and provide selected information instead of causing information overload.

In any case, eventually the Metaverse will disappear. It will either become irrelevant and be replaced by other technologies or it will disappear from people's awareness and perception and become an almost invisible part of their everyday lives. While an important one, the Metaverse is only one example for the necessity to ask ourselves: What are we building technology for? Are we integrating technology into human lives to improve them or do we increasingly integrate humans into technological realities?

References

Weiser, M. (1991). The computer for the 21st century. Scientific American, 265(3), 94–105.

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