

OUR DIGITAL SELVES



With the emergence of the Metaverse, we can reinvent ourselves in ways in which we've always dreamt. Office for design and innovation Modem teamed up with The Fabricant and Anastasiia Fedorova to imagine how our virtual alter-egos could change the ways we think about ourselves. Expanding on the work of the digital fashion house, which explores the malleable future of human identity through non-physical garments, Our Digital Selves studies the ambiguous relationship between the real and the virtual self.

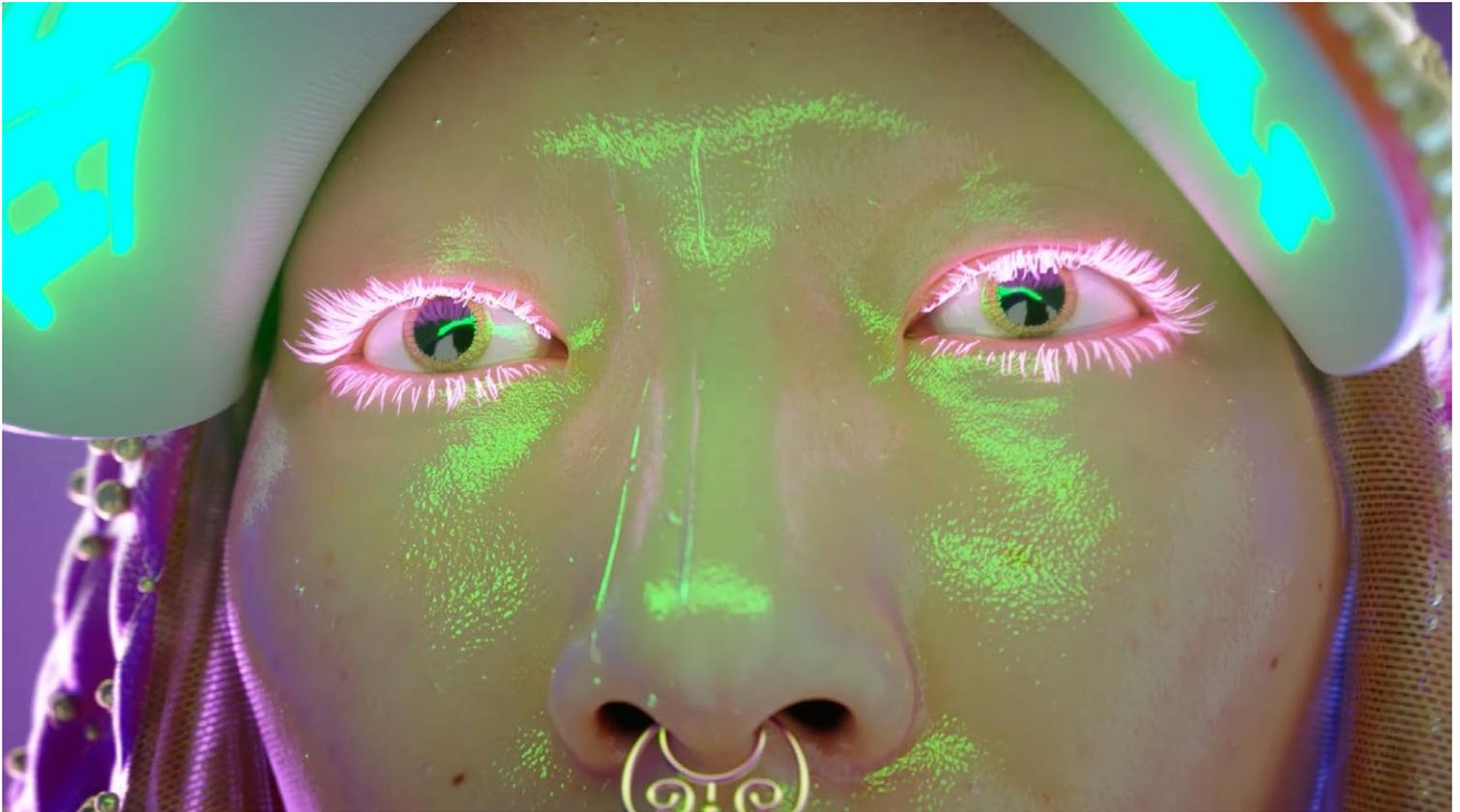
The term "Metaverse" first appeared in Neal Stephenson's 1992 science-fiction novel *Snow Crash* to describe a virtual world in which characters roam as avatars. Rooted in sci-fi, the concept of the Metaverse remains highly speculative today — seemingly within reach, but not yet fully formed. It encompasses several aspects: the advancement of augmented and virtual reality technology, the possibility of accessing these worlds through [wearable tech](#), and the existence of digital selves to navigate these environments. "The Metaverse is the Metaverse, not a metaverse because it must expand everywhere we are digitally connected," [Eric Ravenscraft wrote when he explained the phenomenon](#) in *Wired Magazine*. In the Metaverse, time doesn't stop when you log off. Its horizons and spaces are expansive and connected.

When we think of digital avatars, we often imagine the video games of our adolescence, where we attempted to construct a little twin, a toy version of ourselves to either crush enemies or reside in a house that we designed. They were fully under our control, waiting frozen for their creators to log in again. But the digital avatars of the future iteration of the internet are going to be much more complex, encompassing a decade of social media history. Today, we already inhabit fragmented digital personas, but in the future we will become more intricately linked with them. As we shape our digital avatars, they are likely to shape us in return, in a phenomenon known as the [Proteus effect](#).

Named after the ancient shape-shifting Greek god, the Proteus effect is the tendency for people to be influenced by their digital representations. If your avatar is attractive, confident, or other-worldly and creative, it's not long till you start feeling these qualities finding an embodiment in your real life.

A paper titled "The Proteus Effect: The Effect of Transformed Self-Representation on Behavior", published by Stanford University, documents two studies tracing the relationship between the two. "The attractiveness of their avatars impacted how intimate participants were willing to be with a stranger. [...] it reads. "Participants who had taller avatars were more willing to make unfair splits in negotiation tasks than those who had shorter avatars, whereas participants with shorter avatars were more willing to accept unfair offers than those who had taller avatars. Thus, the height of their avatars impacted how confident participants became."

Digital avatars promise new pleasures, fears and revelations, with the potential to completely rewire our sense of selves. But the truth is, technology has been integral to the contemporary notion of identity for far longer than we usually remember.



'Ecstatic Wholeness', The Fabricant — A digital collection combining garments and jewellery worn historically in The Netherlands with an aesthetic that draws on contemporary clubland references, particularly the hardcore Gabber scene, which originated in Rotterdam in the 90s.

THE INTERNET AS A PLAYGROUND FOR DIGITAL IDENTITY

The idea of radically redefining yourself online is not new. It has existed since the early days of the internet, in text-based chat rooms. "As a teenager I logged on as LuvPunk12 and spent the following years wandering the highways of haunted machinery, occupying chat rooms and building GeoCities GIF fantasies..." wrote an American curator Legacy Russell in her book *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*. "LuvPunk12 as a chatroom handle was a nascent performance, and exploration of a future self. I was a young body: Black, female-identifying, femme, queer. There was no pressing pause, no reprieve, the world around me never let me forget these identities. Yet online I could be whatever I wanted."

In the early days of chat rooms, being able to anonymously login and interact with other humans anywhere in the world was liberating, thrilling, terrifying and addictive. Video games provided another outlet for experimentation.

"I always picked the girls when I played video games. If for no other reason, than out of sheer spite at the ease of identification the boys around me had with their un-interestingly phallic/kamehameha super-heroes..." poet, artist and curator Juliana Huxtable wrote in one of the poems in her pivotal book *Mucus in My Pineal Gland*. She cites Mario Kart's Princess Peach and Street Fighter's Chun Li as figures to channel her rage against boyhood and explore the politics of gender which spans beyond adolescence. Russel and Huxtable are both key figures in shaping the contemporary narrative of transness, proving that the quests for the new meanings of self online and irl are always intricately connected.

The 1999 cult classic *The Matrix*, directed by Lana and Lilly Wachowski, has been foundational in our concept of online mirror worlds. The infinite potential of reinventing yourself in the digital realm sits at the very core of the film. More precisely, the movie has been interpreted as the world's most acclaimed metaphor of transness.

"There are reams of academic literature written on the idea of *The Matrix* as a trans allegory (most of them published after at least Lana came out), but on its most basic level, the movie follows characters who break free of their real life via the internet, creating online identities that feel more real than their physical ones," wrote Emily St. James for Vox. Originally, the film's character of Switch was written to present as male in reality while presenting as female in the Matrix. Even though the idea was ultimately scrapped by Warner Bros., it adds a new level of complexity to the conversation: the infinite potential of online identities, gender as a social construct, and the notion that both physical and the virtual worlds are real in their own right.

In the first decade of the 2000s, identity experimentation existed online in many forms. There was learning how to use basic HTML to install a background image on your MySpace page, or becoming Tumblr-famous solely by curating a tasteful selection of images of foggy forests and perfectly crumpled white beds. Then, of course, there was the chance to spend hours constructing a copy of yourself in *The Sims*. These experiences gave us the first taste of the dilemma: should I just recreate myself online just as I am, or do I go wild and become something completely different?

When Facebook appeared in 2004, the balance started shifting towards the former. In the early iterations of Facebook and Instagram, social media was meant to become a mirror with no distortion, an accurate digital archive of our lives. They chronicled the university you went to, your age and location, a birthday party, the cup of coffee you had this morning, your album of holiday pictures. We found a new sense of relatability in simple experiences, we collectively performed mundanity in the pre-influencer era.

FRAGMENTED SELVES

Today, we inhabit multiple personas online. LinkedIn, Snapchat and Hinge all contain a part of us, aimed at the target audience of this particular platform. Even within the same platform, we sometimes might have one profile for business and one for close friends, or sometimes one dedicated to a specific interest or subculture.

Curiously, this complex multiplicity of self goes against Mark Zuckerberg's original idea of how social media should work. In his book *The Facebook Effect*, David Kirkpatrick recalls that in 2009 Zuckerberg insisted on people having only one identity and insisted that "the days of you having a different image for your work friends or co-workers and for the other people you know are probably coming to an end pretty quickly".

According to Kirkpatrick, Zuckerberg described having two identities as a "lack of integrity" incompatible with the level of transparency online which already existed. And yet we do encompass multiple selves, and our personalities translated into the online space in a fragmentary manner. What would happen to them in the Metaverse? Would we be able to change them like outfits appropriate for a certain occasion?

The all-encompassing, connected nature of the Metaverse calls for a more holistic form of self-expression. This singularity, however, should be achieved not by omitting and hiding parts of ourselves (like a brush which conceals a nipple on Instagram), but by finding new creative and collaborative ways of self-expression.



FASHION AND THE BOUNDARIES OF SELF

In the coming decade, digital avatars will be the key to our existence in the Metaverse. An avatar is a version of yourself which will be able to interact with experiences and objects which only exist digitally. Companies like [Ready Player Me](#), which describes itself as a “one-stop-shop for all your avatar needs”, already offer making one based on a photograph. But ordering a digital copy of yourself is not the only option.

Digital fashion is an integral part of avatars’ future development. In a much-memed moment from the Meta presentation in October 2021 (the pivotal moment of Facebook rebranding as Meta and announcing that the company was entering Web 3.0), we saw Mark Zuckerberg flicking through digital outfits: an astronaut’s hazmat suit, a creepy-cute skeleton onesie and his signature navy long-sleeve. But before we accept this austere selection as the general direction where things are going, it’s worth looking into how we use fashion to form our identities offline, and how it relates to both standing out and blending in with our communities.

In conversations about digital fashion, there is frequently a sense of confusion caused by the absence of a core object of desire — an actual physical garment. But truly, we very rarely buy into fashion for the garments themselves. We buy into fashion for a sense of belonging, to be part of a tribe, for the story, for the image, for the emotion, for the idea of our future selves.

Fashion, despite being marketed and perceived as a pinnacle of individual expression, is a deeply collective experience. [Exactitudes](#), a project conceived by photographer Ari Versluis and stylist Ellie Uyttenbroek in 1994, perfectly exposes the paradox of uniformity and individuality at its core. Versluis and Uyttenbroek started a project in Rotterdam, which at the time was rich with urban tribes and subcultures. They scouted their models on the streets for a stunning exercise of pattern recognition: they isolated and distilled every social clique they encountered on the streets by grouping similarly dressed subjects together. The resulting grids of 3×4 photographs are truly mesmerising in capturing the similarities and nuances of style as part of social consciousness. The grids are powerfully revealing of the fact that in our quest to stand out we often end up blending in with our kin.

Exactitudes is firmly rooted in the pre-digital meaning of subcultures. The style tribes of today are much more hybrid and fluid, drawing from the vast pool of references the digital space provides. Our style trajectories are often collaged from references and memories – some of which are our own, some of which are randomly picked up or suggested by algorithms. When musing on fashion and identity, it's always worth asking: when does wearing something truly change the meaning of who we are?

When we transcend the boundary of self through clothes – be it a crisp white shirt, a latex catsuit, a Supreme long sleeve – it can be an ecstatic experience that changes us. It has potential to unlock the layers of our personality which we were not previously in touch with. It makes us question what is possible. It brings joy and freedom. But could digital fashion and the development of avatars offer something equally as visceral? And when we have an infinite choice of digital selves and skins — which ones will we ultimately pick?



THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF DIGITAL AVATARS

Digital fashion is still an evolving medium. With no fabric and no body to drape, it has potential to be free from endearing yet limiting physicality. As The Fabricant's head of creative strategy and communications Michaela Larosse wrote in her piece [Curating Identity In the Metaverse](#), "Digital fashion will allow us to try on new bodies, new experiences, new ideas, and new lives."

The full potential of self-expression through avatars is not limited to creating one – the effect is likely to impact our sense of self beyond the Metaverse. In an interview on the [Design Notes](#) podcast, one of The Fabricant's co-founders, Kerry Murphy, remembers how seeing his own avatar had a powerful psychological impact — it allowed him not only to consider his fashion choices, but to look at himself through a more body-positive lens and even try out moves he never dared to in real life. Seeing yourself from the outside in 3D potentially offers a new level of self-knowledge — it has many more dimensions than just trying on digital clothes.

Over the next decade, we'll spend more time in digital realms — both professionally and personally — with more control over our digital representations. We'll have a whole new language of self-expression to learn, with its own ethical and creative challenges. But it's important to remember that when we change our self-representation, it changes us in turn — meaning that we'll become only more closely interlinked with our digital personas.