

# A Brave New Internet: Hacking the Narrative of Mark Zuckerberg's 2021 Introduction of the Metaverse

Sjoerd-Jeroen Moenandar, Silvana Beerends-Pavlovic, Bas van den Berg and Gemma Coughlan

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Article abstract

We are entering an era of “techlash”: increasing unease with the hold of large technology companies over our lives, driving by fatalistic feelings of loss of agency. Neither attempts by these companies to address such concerns, such as appointing ethical committees and ombudsmen, nor grassroots initiatives aimed at user empowerment, seem effective in addressing this. This context remains unacknowledged in Mark Zuckerberg's introduction of the metaverse on 28 October 2021. We will show, however, that it is still implicitly addressed through its narrative. A far reaching transformation of the way in which we use the internet is presented as desirable and unescapable, employing an epic narrative mode which values constancy of the individual and their mastery over their surroundings. However, this future is shaped by Zuckerberg and his company; promising agency for all, it is remarkable how little agency is given to the user. We juxtapose this smooth future vision with a counternarrative using the same narrative building stones, but told in a narrative mode distributing agency more equally. Thus, we engage in strategic analysis, exploring how to resist narratives such as the metaverse's. We call this method “hacking the narrative.”

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**SPECIAL ISSUE:  
NARRATIVE AND PERSONAL AND SOCIAL  
TRANSFORMATION**

**A Brave New Internet: Hacking the narrative  
of Mark Zuckerberg's 2021 Introduction of the  
Metaverse**

Sjoerd-Jeroen Moenandar,<sup>1</sup> Silvana Beerends-Pavlovic,<sup>2</sup>  
Bas van den Berg,<sup>3</sup> and Gemma Coughlan<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Corresponding author, Minorities & Multilingualism, Faculty of Arts, University of Groningen, [s.j.moenandar@rug.nl](mailto:s.j.moenandar@rug.nl)*

<sup>2</sup> *Faculty of Digital Media and Creative Industries, Creative Business and Communication, Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, [s.pavlovic@hva.nl](mailto:s.pavlovic@hva.nl)*

<sup>3</sup>*Faculty of Business, Finance and Marketing, Center of Expertise Mission Zero, The Hague University of Applied Sciences and Wageningen School of Social Sciences, Education and Learning Sciences, Wageningen University, [b.vandenberg@hhs.nl](mailto:b.vandenberg@hhs.nl)*

<sup>4</sup>*International Business School, Hanze University of Applied Sciences and Minorities & Multilingualism, Faculty of Arts, University of Groningen, [g.k.coughlan@rug.nl](mailto:g.k.coughlan@rug.nl)*

We are entering an era of “techlash”: increasing unease with the hold of large technology companies over our lives, driving by fatalistic feelings of loss of agency. Neither attempts by these companies to address such concerns, such as appointing ethical committees and ombudsmen, nor grassroot initiatives aimed at user empowerment, seem effective in addressing this. This context remains unacknowledged in Mark Zuckerberg's introduction of the metaverse on 28 October 2021. We will show, however, that it is still implicitly addressed through its narrative. A far reaching transformation of the way in which we use the internet is presented as desirable and unescapable, employing an epic narrative mode which values constancy of the individual and their mastery over their surroundings.

However, this future is shaped by Zuckerberg and his company; promising agency for all, it is remarkable how little agency is given to the user. We juxtapose this smooth future vision with a counternarrative using the same narrative building stones, but told in a narrative mode distributing agency more equally. Thus, we engage in strategic analysis, exploring how to resist narratives such as the metaverse's. We call this method "hacking the narrative."

**Keywords:**

*techlash, Meta, narrative analysis, future literacy, metaverse, Zuckerberg*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

On 28 October, 2021, after having carefully built suspension for weeks, Facebook Inc. rebranded itself as Meta during its annual Connect conference. Central to this rebranding was a speech by Facebook founder and CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, on the metaverse and the role that the newly named Meta would play in its coming about (Meta 2021). A combination of virtual and augmented reality, the metaverse is supposed to become a "fusion between the virtual world and the physical world" (Riva & Wiederhold, 2022). Given the high visibility of this event, Zuckerberg's speech immediately became one of the main narratives surrounding the as yet unrealised metaverse (Fernandez & Hui, 2022).

This paper is not concerned with the metaverse as such – that is to say, as a project on which Meta and other major technology companies are currently spending large amounts of time, money and effort (Riva & Wiederhold, 2022; Bibri et al. 2022). Instead, we will present a narrative analysis of the part of his speech in which Zuckerberg introduces his vision for the metaverse. We feel such an analysis has a certain urgency: because of the power and reach of Zuckerberg and Meta, any vision for the future they present, arguably becomes a dominant story (Winslade & Monk, 1999), prescribing an understanding of the future that, although one does not have to subscribe to, one at least will have to relate to when narrating one's own expectations of the future. Given the limited scope of this paper, we cannot discuss the entire speech, but will focus on its first three minutes. These three minutes and the narrative they encompass function, as we will see, as an entrance point into the story world, through which Zuckerberg presents to his audience the desirable and inevitable metaverse-to-be.

We will approach Zuckerberg's speech as a "dialogical single case study," that is to say, as "a complex singular event" that is studied as a complete whole, albeit an open-ended one, with a focus on "relations among elements of that whole" (Marková et al., 2020, p. 506). The focus on this dialogical nature will allow

us to tease out how Zuckerberg's speech is part – whether acknowledged by the speaker or not – of an ongoing cultural dialogue on both what the metaverse is or should be, and on the best way to represent it (Bakhtin, 1986; Moenandar, 2013). We will discuss how this event is both embedded within a dynamic context, and can be seen as an attempt to shape that context (Marková et al., 2020; Cornish 2020) as it suggests a distribution of the roles of *agens* and *patiens* – those who act and those who are acted upon – involved in that context (Ricoeur 1984). More specifically, we assess how Zuckerberg's speech enters into dialogue with two contexts. First of all, there is the context of a looming techlash: increasing unease with the hold of large technology companies over our lives. Secondly, the speech can be placed in a long tradition of how new media and their effects tend to be surrounded with certain hopes and anxieties. We will furthermore assess how within these contexts Zuckerberg posits Meta, himself, and the future users he seems to be addressing with his speech *vis à vis* the metaverse, and how agency is distributed among these.

As we will explain below, in section 2, our method of analysis consists of a narrative analysis that focuses on plot structure as conceptualised in classical structuralist narratology (Greimas, 1991), with special attention to the way in which narrative negotiates values (Korthals Altes, 2014) and the role that choices of genre play in this (Bakhtin, 1986; Moenandar, 2017a). Using this method, we will show how Zuckerberg's speech can be seen as an attempt to offer a narrative of how people will communicate, connect, and interact on a global level in the future. Sketching a far-reaching transformation of the way in which we use the internet, Zuckerberg presents Meta's idea of what the future will look like as desirable and unescapable. For this, he employs an epic narrative mode which values constancy of the individual and their mastery over their surroundings. This choice of narrative mode allows Zuckerberg and Meta to remain firmly in control of the projected future: promising agency for all, it is remarkable how little agency is given to the user in this narrative.

We will then exemplify the specific position that Zuckerberg's speech takes in the ongoing cultural dialogue of which it is part by comparing it with another voice in that dialogue, a short promotional video for the online project *Forgetting Nature* (Harrison, 2021). The central theme in this video is similar to that of Zuckerberg's speech: it envisions a future, with a focus on how humans interact with technology. However, in this second video, the future is questioned rather than envisioned, and the consequences of humanity's relation to technology for its relation with nature are explored. Such "contrasting" (Cornish, 2020) of dialogical single case studies can help to tease out the singularity of each of these,

which often remains implicit within the specific event. The juxtaposition of both these future narratives (Liveley, 2022) also reveals the importance of the genre, or narrative mode, in which stories are told. While the inequal distribution of agency in Zuckerberg's speech is facilitated by its epic mode, the promotional video for *Forgetting Nature* contains the same narrative elements, but is told in a narrative mode in which agency is distributed more equally. Thus, we engage in strategic analysis, exploring how to resist narratives such as the one presented by Meta by tapping into their specific type of emplotment and considering alternatives. We call this type of strategic analysis *hacking the narrative*.

### 1.1 Techlash

Three years before introducing his vision for the metaverse, Zuckerberg found himself testifying and apologising before the United States Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation in the context of the then-ongoing Cambridge Analytica data scandal, an event in which the data of 87 million Facebook users was collected without their consent and used to create highly personalised, targeted political advertising campaigns that have been implicated in swaying the results of major elections (Confessore, 2018; Lapowsky, 2018). This scandal is the most high-profile example of a string of scandals in 2016 and 2017 that, together with an increasing number of critical voices in the media has led to widespread unease with the extent to which large technology companies can manipulate economic, social and, especially, political realities (Weiss-Blatt, 2021, 36; Van Dijck, 2021).

The ensuing concern “with the excesses of digital technology and culture” (Sommer, 2017, p. 52) has been given the catchy moniker “techlash,” sometimes spelled “tech-lash” (Van Dijck, 2021, 323), although the term predates the aforementioned scandals. Originally appearing in the opinion pages of international media (e.g., Wooldridge, 2013; Botsman, 2018), techlash had also become a genre in literature, film, and television taking aim at big tech companies such as “Google, Facebook, Amazon, and others” and the “mind change” these have brought about in global society (Sommer, 2017, pp. 52-53). After the aforementioned scandals, this techlash became a driving force behind “increased public distrust, civil and worker activism, and regulatory scrutiny” directed towards the technology industry (Viljoen, 2021, p. 284), and especially towards the so-called Big Five: Google-Alphabet, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, Microsoft (Van Dijck, 2019, p. 2). Local, national, and supranational governments engaged in a “a wide range of negotiation battles”, handed out heavy fines, and set up laws and

policies to curb the activities of these and other companies, who also found themselves in a series of high-profile court cases (Van Dijck, 2019). This suggests that there is now a “profound distrust” of the role that tech companies play in contemporary societies (Van Dijck, 2021, p. 323) and that the techlash is “creating a space for new models of liability and duty to be proposed” (Mac Síthigh, 2020, p. 3). Beside statutory measures, there is also a demand for voluntary measures out of a sense of duty on the side of digital intermediaries and social media platforms in order to take responsibility for the way in which data is harvested and content is managed (Mac Síthigh, 2020; Mitroff & Storesund, 2020). This call on the tech industry to develop a “tech ethics” has led to initiatives, from the side of tech companies, such as “ethics boards, company-funded corporate wellness and social responsibility initiatives” (Viljoen, 2021, p. 286).

Although these initiatives have been met with strong scepticism from the side of the general public and lawmakers (Mitroff & Storesund, 2020; Viljoen, 2021), the fact that tech companies invest significant “bureaucratic and material resources” on them shows they are aware that a response to the techlash is necessary. Even though the “Big Five” certainly do not fulfil critics’ criteria for socially responsible tech organisation (Mitroff & Storesund, 2020), they seem to at least want to signal they are taking corrective action in order to minimise damage to their brands (Weiss-Blatt, 2021, pp. 82-85). Less cynically, research has also shown that techlash criticism emotionally affects those working for technology companies, and although this does not always lead to direct action, it can generate a desire to make a more positive impact on society (Su et al., 2021). As Bakhtin has argued, any utterance takes place in a “dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 276) where it takes position deliberately or not *vis à vis* other utterances that use the same signs or relate to the same concepts. Thus, Zuckerberg’s speech cannot be cut loose from the ongoing techlash, even though it is not explicitly mentioned in the speech if only because the larger part of Zuckerberg’s audience will have been more or less aware of this context.

## 1.2 Introducing new media

Facebook rebranding itself as Meta must be seen as an attempt to underscore the company’s “focus beyond traditional social media” (Fernandez 2022, p. 1). This explains why Zuckerberg’s speech introducing his vision for the metaverse was at the centre of that rebranding: the underlying rhetoric is that with the metaverse, Meta is introducing something new, something better, than what has come before. Given the techlash discussed in the previous section, this makes sense

from a business point of view. Indeed, despite the rhetoric that Meta's name-change is meant to herald a "a new era of social interaction enabled by the metaverse technology," it seems that it is mostly geared towards changing the attitude towards the company, both externally and internally (Kraus et al., 2022).

In any case, instrumental to this rebranding is the notion of the metaverse as radically new and different. As such, Zuckerberg's speech stands in a long tradition of presenting new media as enabling an immediacy that no medium has been able to establish before (Bolter & Grusin, 1999). The idea, in other words, that every new medium is an improvement on previous media, one step closer, first, towards presenting life as it is, and, then, replacing it with something better. That is exactly the promise that Zuckerberg makes about the metaverse. Interestingly enough, some fifteen years before Zuckerberg spoke of the metaverse, the so-called Web 2.0 was introduced in very much the same way (O'Reilly & Battelle, 2009). New to Web 2.0, of which Facebook, alongside the other Big Five mentioned above, quickly became the main exponent for many, was the fact that it offered "ordinary people" the chance to "contribute content via blogs, customer reviews, or other public postings." They did so by use of platforms that created "simple, reliable environments where users can do what they want" (Blank & Reisdorf 2012, pp. 337-339). The implication is strikingly similar to Zuckerberg's introduction of the metaverse and, in fact, the hype surrounding any medium, arguably going all the way back to the myth of Pygmalion; What is offered here, supposedly for the first time, is not mediated reality, not even reality itself, but something better than reality.

Typical to this kind of new media rhetoric is also the notion that it enables increased connectivity and agency on the side of the user (Strathern, 1992; Weibel 1996). Especially in the latter half of the twentieth century, new media such as video, the PC and, later, the internet, were supposed to facilitate a clean break from a "mass society model [...] of mass media" in which the production of media content is "dominated by large organizations with high-speed production processes and widespread distribution," offering instead a "personal production and distribution model" (Blank & Reisdorf, 2012, pp. 537-538). Thus, a pattern can be discerned in which "new" media, originally introduced as offering such user agency, are subsequently, and within increasingly shorter time-spans, brushed aside as severely lacking when the next new medium comes along. The original internet, for example, once the epitome of this kind of user agency, is summarised as merely being "a source of information" for mostly passive users when juxtaposed to the then brand new Web 2.0 (Blank & Reisdorf, 2012, p. 537). Ten years later, Web 2.0 itself is framed in the techlash as frustrating user agency, being dominated by

large organizations that control its distribution and management. This, then, is a second important context within which we want to place Zuckerberg's speech and its vision for the metaverse: How does it suggest to remedy, albeit implicitly, the perceived loss of agency currently associated with social media platforms?

## 2. METHODS, AIM AND SCOPE

Dialogical single case studies can be studied with diverse methods from a variety of disciplines, and the choice of method is often pragmatic, depending on the case study at hand (Marková, 2020). In the light of what we wrote in the previous sections, we are primarily interested in how user agency is negotiated in Zuckerberg's speech, and expect that there will be a strong suggestion that the envisioned metaverse will facilitate user agency in radical new ways. We have therefore opted for a narrative method of analysis, as we conceptualise narrative as a primary tool for people to ascribe and distribute agency. Narrative, after all, is not merely the representation of an interconnected series of events, but also establishes who can be seen as the instigator of these events, what their reasons and capacities are as they bring these events about, what exactly happens when they do so, and what the results of this are (Moenandar & Huisman, 2017, p. 135). As such, narrative can be seen as having agency as its central concern, as it revolves around the relation between a subject and an object (Greimas, 1991). As Greimas has argued, this relation transforms throughout four consecutive stages. In the "manipulation stage," the subject develops a desire for the object; in the "competence stage," the subject gathers the means to acquire that object; in the "performance stage," the subject either acquires the object or fails to do so; and in the "sanctions stage," the consequences of acquiring, or failing to acquire the object become clear (Greimas, 1991; Greimas & Courtés, 1982; Robichaud, 2003). Together, these stages form the narrative programme. A narrative always consists of at least one narrative programme, but often contains several.

In any narrative, subject and object are the main actants; "Beings or things that participate in processes in any form whatsoever, be it only a walk-on part and in the most passive way" (Greimas & Courtés, 1982, p. 75). Beside these two, there are four more such actants: the "sender," who causes the subject to desire the object; the "receiver," to whom the subject hands over the object in the sanctions stage; a "helper," aiding the subject with acquiring the object; and an "opponent" who obstructs the subject's attempts to acquire or keep the object. It is important to not confuse these roles with characters who play some part in the narrative. One character may fulfil several roles, while several characters can fulfil one particular

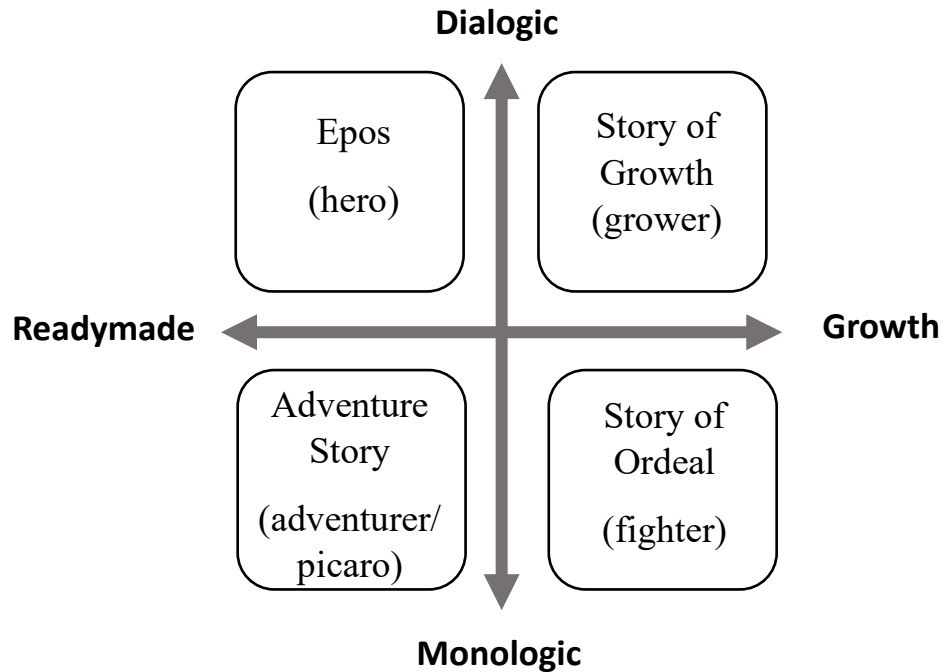


role. Furthermore, actants do not have to be human, but can be animals, phenomena, or even a state of mind (Greimas & Courtés, 1982; Robichaud, 2003; Moenandar & Huisman, 2017). If a narrative contains more than one narrative programme, the roles may also be redistributed throughout the different programmes.

Originally part of Greimas's project to map the underlying grammar that regulates all narratives, the narrative programme and the actantial model described above have become tools for the analysis of narrative. First, these were mainly employed in the analysis of literary texts, which was the focus of most of Greimas's own work and the structuralist narratological tradition he helped to found. However, they are increasingly used to analyse narrative sense-making in diverse settings such as, for instance, organisations (e.g., Robichaud, 2003) or education (e.g., Moenandar, Duarte & Lucaci, 2022). Since the actantial model can be conceptualised as a "relational system" (Robichaud, 2003, p. 39), it enables an analysis of who, in the narrative, is acting, and who is acted upon (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 55). The narrative programme, furthermore, can be seen as a "pattern of transformations" (Robichaud, 2003, p. 41), comprising four constitutive types of events throughout which several actions are performed by the actant and made meaningful by the way in which they are related to each other in the narratives. As such, it allows us to see how value is negotiated in that narrative, with the manipulation stage establishing "the incentive, desire, or imperative to act", and the sanction stage assigning "meaning and value" to the action in the other stages. Thus, making apparent through analysis the implied narrative programme of a narrative can help us to find out which "values and meanings [are] at stake" (Korthals Altes, 2014, 295n3).

The ways in which actions become meaningful and the distribution of agency is presented, are regulated by the narrative mode, or genre of the narrative at hand. As such, a narrative mode imbues a narrative with a set of norms and values of how one should relate to oneself and one's surroundings (Moenandar, 2017a). Based on a history of narrative genres proposed by Bakhtin (1986), a typology of narrative genres has been developed with which narratives can be mapped according to (1) the extent to which a narrative's subject evolves throughout the narrative, and (2) the extent to which subject and their context, including the other actants, can change each other in meaningful ways (Moenandar & Huisman, 2017). Placing these criteria on two crossing axes, with (1) on the horizontal axis and (2) on the vertical one, this model comprises a typology of four ideal-typical narratives (figure 1).

**Figure 1:** A typology of narrative genres and their subject (from Moenandar & Huisman, 2017)



This model can help to map what motivates a subject in a narrative, what they value as worth striving for, and how they relate to other actants. On the left side, we find genres in which the subject behaves as ‘a moving point in space’ (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 10). They are “readymade” and do not experience fundamental change as time progresses. The genres to the right have subjects that are different in meaningful ways at the end of the story from how they were at the beginning. The narrative programme is equal to their personal growth. The two quadrants below, furthermore, are genres with a subject that is not influenced significantly by the world around them: their surroundings and the other actants; nor do they influence these significantly. The genres at the top have subjects who are defined in crucial ways by their interaction with the world around them (Moenandar & Huisman 2017).

For us, these models are not just tools for analysis. They can also be used to enhance our narrative savviness, or narrative literacy: our capacity to

recognise how narratives are constructed (rather than neutral representations of life as it is or, in this case, will be), and how they may be used for persuasion. Narrative literacy enables us to critically reflect on how a given narrative negotiates certain values, and to actively resist storytelling if we disagree with these (Moenandar, 2018). That is why we call our analysis a *strategic analysis*. It is not just an assessment of the narrative of the Metaverse as presented by Zuckerberg, but also aims, by considering how it is constructed, to open up the possibility to consider other possible ways of constructing that narrative. If we tease out the arrangement of the actantial model and the narrative programme of the metaverse narrative in Zuckerberg's speech, and how this presents a certain outcome as worthy and valuable, we can also rearrange them in a way more in line with other sets of values, should we deem this necessary. In other words, our strategic analysis can serve as a catalyst for agency and change, and become a form of *hacking*: an interrogation of the rationality of technocultures by situating oneself within a specific technoculture, then using its constitutive elements to change it. Such hacking is aimed at both widening the range of actions that the technoculture allows for, and by changing its very nature (Jordan, 2016).

This is particularly important in the case of the kind of narrative that is presented in the speech by Zuckerberg: a future narrative. Like all future narratives, the story world proposed in this speech is a possible world; it is fictional and comes about through the creative act of imagination (Liveley, Slocombe & Piers, 2021). However, Zuckerberg's future narrative is not merely that. It is also an example of how tech companies propose "corporate sociotechnical imaginaries" that are presented as desirable and inevitable futures to "disguise the company's aspiration for profit and power" (Haupt, 2021, p. 239). Zuckerberg's summoning of the future metaverse is a central element in Meta's strategic storytelling, presenting the company's new platform to his audience as something to "collectively" look forward to and see "as a necessity on the path to a better world" (Haupt, 2021, p. 239). As such, it is an example of a "locked-in" future narrative (Liveley, Slocombe & Piers 2021, p. 2) which masks the fact that it is only one possibility among many. Furthermore, such locked-in future narratives tend to be strongly limited by the current status quo, which "restricts the imagination and anticipation of the potential harms threatened by emerging technologies, including the myriad harms of modern sociotechnical slavery" (Liveley, 2022, p. 91). There is, therefore, an immanent need to improve our "futures literacy": the ability to resist these narratives and thereby open "up diverse and unanticipated possible futures" (Liveley, 2022, p. 91).

Thus, hacking the narrative becomes, in this case, hacking the future as well. This paper is meant as a first attempt to demonstrate what this could look like. If our analytical tools have a use value for teasing out the strategic choices made by Meta and Zuckerberg in constructing their future narrative, and facilitate considering alternatives, they may be of help in improving narrative and futures literacy. We will exemplify this by shortly analysing such an alternative, using the same analytical tools: the video *Forgetting Nature. What is Environmental Amnesia*, directed by Roy Harrison, featuring Peter H. Kahn Jr. As mentioned above, this is a promotional video for an online project, *Forgetting Nature*, which seeks to intervene in what it sees as humanity's deteriorating relation with wildlife (*Forgetting Nature*, 2021). In this video, Kahn director of the Human Interaction With Nature and Technological Systems Lab at the University of Washington presents a future narrative that is at the same time very similar to that of Zuckerberg, and yet completely different. By juxtaposing Zuckerberg's narrative with the one in *Forgetting Nature*, the latter becomes a counternarrative, opening up the future in a different way. We will discuss the implications of this in our conclusion.

### 3. ANALYSIS

Throughout the three minutes we are focusing on here, there is indeed a clear stress on the "newness" of the metaverse. Zuckerberg repeatedly talks about an "*embodied* internet" (Meta 2021, emphasis added), which he opposes to the use of screens. This is where the biggest change in the public use of the future internet lies, according to the narrative Zuckerberg is putting forward here. The aforementioned pitching of new media with the promise of immediacy is clearly recognisable: Zuckerberg contrasts experiencing the internet in a limited way, through small mobile screens, as we do today, with the embodied experience we can now look forward to. This "next version" supposedly both building and improving upon what we know (Bolter and Grusin 1999) is constantly framed positively, as "the best way," with the repetition of words such as "immersive," "amazing," and "inspiring" (Meta 2021). As we argued in section 2, this is clearly a locked-in future narrative; there can be no doubt that this is supposed to be *the* future of the internet. Thus, the metaverse is presented as the inescapable, yet desirable successor of our current, hopelessly limited internet, while remaining firmly rooted in it. This double logic is mirrored in Zuckerberg's double-sided ethos (Korthals Altes, 2014). On the one hand, he is putting all his authority as the CEO of the main player of Web 2.0 behind this narrative, adopting a prophetic tone of voice while making a string of definite predictions for the future such as: "We

believe the Metaverse will be the successor to the mobile internet” (Meta 2021). Yet at the same time, he is, implicitly, proposing a metaverse that is everything that the Facebook distrusted by so many is not.

### 3.1 The narrative programme: a promise

The rhetoric of the metaverse as both inescapable and desirable is facilitated by a narrative programme of which the manipulation stage consists for a large part of deriding the current situation. Somewhat surprisingly, coming from the CEO of Facebook, this includes a thorough dismissal of social media platforms and interfaces as limited and insufficient. Note, however, that is not a dismissal of social media *per se* just their current state and with the currently available hardware. This limitation lies in their lack of immediacy: “Screens just can’t convey the full range of human expression and connection. They can’t deliver that deep feeling of *presence*” (Meta, 2021). Here, the subject which is alternately presented with the second person singular, and the first person plural, while it remains unclear whether the latter refers to Zuckerberg and his audience, or the people working at Meta is given an object. Apparently, *presence* is what should be strived for, and it is the metaverse that will help achieve this.

This is also where what has been called “the breach” of the narrative is introduced, an event that makes the narrative’s action necessary, e.g. a disruption that necessitates the restoration of order, or a wrong that needs to be righted (Murray and Sools 2015). In this narrative, the breach lies in the internet not reaching its full capacity yet:

Current human digital interaction exists but is incomplete as it does not match how we as humans actually experience the world and interact with each other, therefore we need an embodied digital experience in which humans can create and experience the full range of human expression, connection and a deep feeling of presence (Meta 2021).

What is introduced with this breach is a typical form of strategic storytelling, often used to market products as innovative; a problem is defined for the audience, after which the product is offered as its solution. Here, this is embedded in a vision for the future, as it is made clear what to expect in the sanction stage: “That’s what we should be working towards. Technology that’s built around people and how we actually experience the world and interact with each other. To

do almost anything you can imagine” (Meta, 2021). Thus, the reward for striving towards the object and, in the process, establishing the metaverse, will not just be immediacy, but also agency for all.

Within the narrative, the metaverse is presented as a tool, something that will help the subject of which it remains open to interpretation whether it is all of us, us at Meta, or Zuckerberg himself to achieve its object of a utopian future of total immediacy and agency. This also makes clear what the competency stage of the narrative is supposed to be: creating this metaverse, something Zuckerberg and his team at Meta are busy doing. Here, we can see how using Greimas’s narrative programme as an analytical tool is not just a question of creating the narratological equivalent of a sentence diagram. Establishing the different stages can also give insight into how the narrative is an attempt to create meaning and entice its addressees to make sense of its topic in a certain way (Korthals Altes, 2014). When Zuckerberg announces that “we’ve put together something that I think is really going to give you a feeling for what this future could be like” (Meta, 2021), he is making clear that establishing the metaverse as Meta envisions it is in full swing: his narrative is only *partly* a future narrative, with the manipulation stage and part of the competency stage already behind us. This underscores both its inevitability, and Meta’s crucial role in bringing it about. Here, we also see, for the first time, what will be a paradox throughout the narrative. While the Metaverse promises agency for all, the user comes to the story *in medias res*, with Zuckerberg and his team already in control the only agency that the narrative allows for, is theirs, while the audience merely has to believe in, and expect to become a user of whatever it is that they are creating.

This is, admittedly, very common for commercial advertisements. Companies regularly create narratives in which the customer is the subject, and the company and the product they are trying to sell are occupying the actant of helper, needed for the subject to obtain its object. However, since in this narrative the metaverse is both a means to an end, and that end in itself both what is necessary to achieve utopia, and that utopia itself things become more ambiguous here. Zuckerberg points to this himself, when he says, “Rather than just focusing on this year’s products [...] we’re going to talk about the future. So let’s start by exploring what different kinds of metaverse experiences could feel like, starting with the most important experience of all, connecting with people” (Meta, 2021). Here, his audience gets a peek of what the performance stage of this ongoing narrative is going to look like. Note, too, how that future is tied to Facebook, of which Zuckerberg previously claimed that “connecting the world” is its core business (Zuckerberg, 2017). This is also where the audience is allowed some

agency again: once Meta has provided them with the metaverse, they can set out on their quest for immediacy and living the “amazing” and “inspiring” life Zuckerberg is promising them. Zuckerberg himself now adopts the perspective of the audience as he wanders around this brave new internet, checking in on its denizens, who show him what wonders it has, such as luxury homes with views of pristine landscapes, meeting rooms in which the visitors can float in space, and lush forest rooms. The human interaction is friendly and inspiring, the nature pristine and color-saturated and even better than the real thing, as we discover when an enthusiastic Meta employee introduces a miracle: “Koi fish that fly. That’s new.” Demonstrating the response expected of the audience, a wide-eyed Zuckerberg says, “This is wild” (Meta 2021). The focus is on the spectacle. The question whether creating virtual flying koi fish should be a priority in a world where actual fish species are dying out because of the ongoing climate emergency is not what the audience is expected to be thinking of.

This brings us to the sanctions stage of the narrative. The fact that in the metaverse, problems such as the climate emergency do not exist is, of course, part of its appeal. With the logic inherent in all narrative that the end point is the necessary outcome of the plot that was set in motion at its starting point (Ricoeur, 1992, 141) the desire for immediacy and agency in the manipulation face will lead to the metaverse Zuckerberg envisions in the sanctions stage. As Zuckerberg promises, returning to the tone of voice of prophecy, “Everything we do online today connecting socially, entertainment, games, work is going to be more natural and vivid.” Now, we will finally be able to be who we want to be total agency: “We’ll be able to feel present like we’re right there with people no matter how far apart we actually are. We’ll be able to express ourselves in new, joyful, completely immersive ways and that’s to unlock a lot of amazing new experiences” (Meta, 2021). In short, when we have allowed Meta to bring us the metaverse, we will live in a human-centered utopia, where the quality of life will be as never before.

### **3.2 The actantial model: Strategic clarity and ambiguity**

In the description of the narrative programme in the previous section, a number of actants were already identified. As we saw, it was made very clear what “our” object should be: presence and immediacy. Much less immediately clear, as we argued, was the subject. Note that Zuckerberg, who narrates the story of the metaverse-to-be in this speech, is not its subject. As a narrator, Zuckerberg is what is sometimes called an allodiegetic narrator (Herman and Vervaeck, 2019, 91-92), also known as a witness-narrator (Doctor Watson in Arthur Conan Doyle’s stories

about Sherlock Holmes is a famous example of this type of narrator). That is to say, he is a bystander narrating the subject's desires and actions. As we discussed above, this subject is alternately presented with the second person singular, and the first person plural, with the latter sometimes referring to Zuckerberg and his audience, sometimes to the people working at Meta of which Zuckerberg, as the CEO and face of that company is also the embodiment (and as such, does shift into the role of subject at times, which will be discussed further in section 3.3). This allows for a certain ambiguity. While the object, as we will see, is clear, it remains somewhat opaque who, actually, wants to obtain it. Of course, this ambiguity in which the "we" that stands for the subject at times seems to include the audience, or even becomes "you," i.e., those watching Zuckerberg's speech, serves a strategic purpose: it merges the desire of Meta with that of the world at large.

Equally ambiguous is the actant of sender. Why, exactly, are "we" or "you" supposed to want immediacy and presence? As we said, there is a strong hint of inevitability in Zuckerberg's future narrative, as he presents a teleological process of coming ever closer to full immediacy: "Desktop to web to phones, from text to photos to video. But this isn't the end of the line. The next platform and medium will be even more immersive, an embodied internet where you're in the experience, not just looking at it, and we call this the metaverse" (Meta, 2021). This is in line with the history of new media or rather, the history of what is claimed of new media we discussed in section 1.2. Thus, the sender is occupied by the same shifting "we" and "you" that occupies the subject. "We" want to achieve total immersion, because we are locked in a trajectory towards the "end of the line." There is no alternative, nor should we want it. Similarly, the merging of Meta with the world at large through the shifting pronouns and who they refer to, allows for the suggestion that the receiver, those who benefit from the subject obtaining the object, is also first and foremost going to be all of us. Thus, when Zuckerberg predicts that "[e]verything we do online today connecting socially, entertainment, games, work is going to be more natural and vivid," he also implies that all the hard work Meta is now putting into bringing about the metaverse, is going to benefit all of us (Meta, 2021).

This makes clear as well who is the helper in this narrative. Meta, relentlessly and dedicatedly plodding on, making sure that one day we *will* reach the end of the line. Like Q delivering the latest gadgets to James Bond so that he may be successful in saving the world, Meta is helping all of us in our quest to total immersion. However, the subject of this particular narrative is no action hero insofar as the "we" and "you" refer to Zuckerberg's audience, they are fully dependent on "we" at Meta to achieve their object. It is only "we" in the sense of



Zuckerberg and his team, and Meta in its role as helper, who are presented as active agents in this narrative. Take, for instance the following utterance by Zuckerberg: “But it’s a little tough because it doesn’t [exist yet]... Emerging as we speak, we’re starting to get a sense of how it could all come together and what it could feel like” (Meta, 2021). The “we” here does not, as elsewhere, include the audience. This is Meta working towards that inevitable endpoint. All the rest of the world can do is wait, passively, until Meta has worked it out for all of us. In this respect, it is hardly surprising that the actant of opponent remains rather underdeveloped in this narrative. If “we” all want this, who would oppose Meta bringing about the metaverse? The only real opponent here is the current, limited state of the internet. This is a narrative of emergence (Moenandar, 2017b, pp. xvii-xix), of overcoming present limitations. If we are shackled by the limitations of technology today, Meta will deliver us from those shackles in the future.

### 3.3 Genre

As argued above, the narrative mode, or genre in which a story is narrated, comes with its own set of norms and values as it represents reality in a certain way, building a specific type of word-world-construct that includes a moral assessment of the events it presents. Using the typology of genres given at the end of section 2, we can draw the following conclusions about the narrative mode of Zuckerberg’s story in which an ambiguous “we” aims to achieve the object of total immersion through establishing the Metaverse.

As said, the subject of Zuckerberg’s narrative shifts from a general “you” to a broad “we” (Zuckerberg and his audience, including Meta and its employees), to a narrow “we” (Meta and its employees). As the founder of Facebook and Meta’s spokesperson, Zuckerberg, who is not the subject of the story *per se*, does personify this last, more narrow “we.” In this role, he regularly, as we argued, adapts a prophetic narrative voice that fits the ethos (Korthals Altes 2014) within which his narrative is embedded the powerful CEO, having created and controlling some of the largest media platforms used on a daily basis by billions around the globe which gives him both a privileged insight into the future, and the power to offer the technology that is needed to bring about the best of worlds. Thus, alongside personifying the narrow “we” of Meta and its employees, he is the natural leader-figure for the broader “we” and the “you” that include all of us.

This places Zuckerberg’s narrative quite firmly in the upper left quadrant of the typology of genres, which Moenandar and Huisman (2017) have called “epos.” This genre also fits the narrative’s aforementioned teleological

nature. The subject does not change, but does bring about change in its environment. Progressing towards its ultimate goal of creating media that offer total transparency and immediacy, the subject remains, fundamentally, the same in its desires and abilities. It always desired this object and will not rest until it has attained it. This desire, which the narrative supposes we all share, will finally be achieved by Zuckerberg for us, both in the role of helper, but also personifying the subject humanity at large in its striving towards this object. The core values that are typically conveyed through the epic narrative mode are constancy of the individual and mastery over one's surroundings (Moenandar 2018), which is also what we see here.

### 3.4 Kahn's Counternarrative

As described in section 2, our aim in this paper is to engage in a strategic analysis that does more than merely tease out a narrative's constitutive elements. Hacking the narrative also involves tweaking those elements in order to open up space for change. One could envision narrative *hackathons*, in which participants are challenged to take a narrative such as Zuckerberg's dominant narrative and rearrange it in ways that are more wholesome for people and planet. This lies beyond the reach of the current research, but to not merely offer our own, unchecked rearrangement of Zuckerberg's narrative, we finish our analysis with a discussion of an alternative future narrative that consists of the same constitutive elements, but is told in a different narrative mode and thereby presents a different future ethics. This is where we turn to the aforementioned *Forgetting Nature. What is Environmental Amnesia* (Harrison 2021). In this short film, Peter Kahn encourages people to join an online conversation about our interaction with nature, and how technology mediates that interaction, asking his audience to pay more attention to the wildlife that surrounds us. In what follows, we will contrast Kahn's future narrative with Zuckerberg's.

As said, the constitutive elements of both narratives are roughly the same. The subject consists in both cases of a broad "we" that includes the speaker and his audience, and a "you" that directly refers to the audience; but in Kahn's case, there is no narrower "we" that only refers to the speaker and his team. The object, in both narratives, is desired because an unease with the current state of affairs: something is missing from our lives and we need to establish a future where this perceived lack will no longer be. As Kahn puts it, "You need a lot of awareness of what your experience is of the world to feel if some of that is being taken away." Kahn, however, does not sketch a future in which technology is the solution. In his

narrative, we have been moving away from a more fulfilling existence, rather than towards it: “In some sense we think we’re the most advanced culture, we take such pride in technology and the advancement, but in some other ways, we’re more distant from the natural world than any culture’s ever been.” As a consequence, Kahn’s future narrative is dystopian, rather than utopian: “We’re spending an enormous amount of time moving into a distracted world. That’s a non-natural world, that is focusing our attention with that 18-inch gaze. The devices are an escape” (Harrison, 2021). Thus, between Zuckerberg’s and Kahn’s narratives, technology shifts from the role of helper to that of opponent.

If the object of desire is, in both cases, a sense of immediacy, of direct contact, then in Kahn’s narrative this object can only be achieved by a retracing our steps, rather than continuing onwards: reconnecting with nature as it is, rather than attempting to achieve an ever more faithful representation of it. If the promise of new media is modelled on the myth of Pygmalion – the possibility to create a representation of reality that is so perfect that it can replace the original – then Kahn’s narrative can be seen as an attempt to unmask the folly of Pygmalion: why try to create a new living creature out of stone if the world is already full of beautiful creatures that need our immediate care and attention? Why would one desire flying koi fish, if the natural environment of actual koi fish is in peril from an ongoing climate crisis?

In this narrative, the “we” remains fully inclusive. The narrative voice is, in both cases, prophetic. However, Kahn is not the leader-prophet, guiding his people towards a desirable future, but a truthsayer, encouraging his audience to assume agency and address the catastrophe he sees coming: “And it’s not the way things are. It’s the way we’ve made them. And we can change it” (Harrison, 2021). Thus, Kahn also undermines the idea that we are on the only possible path towards an inevitable future – each of us has agency in the matter and is hereby invited to use it for the best.

The above is established in the manipulation stage of Kahn’s narrative. The competence stage consists of a process of “learning to really feel again what is happening to our planet” and also “feeling the real loss of our actions now.” This process of learning will enable us to realise that technology is not, as in Zuckerberg’s narrative, the means to our end of a more fulfilling life. Instead, we need to realise that “we’re struggling. It’s insane. We’re an insane society” (Harrison, 2021). This realisation will help us, in the performance stage, to resist current developments, which are remarkably similar to those sketched in Zuckerberg’s narrative: online representations that are ever more natural and vivid.

Kahn, however, casts these developments in a negative light: “The urban environment gets harsher. All of a sudden it’s too harsh, but now you’ve got a device. And you choose whatever programme you want, there are thousands, ten thousand you can choose.” We can indeed immerse ourselves more and more in our media as these are developed further and further, but as we do so, we will increasingly fail to realise that meanwhile nature will diminish to a point of no return. Should we, however, be able to experience what we are losing by re-establishing our connection with nature, we can become more critical towards the same future that is presented as so desirable by Zuckerberg as he introduces us to a Metaverse filled with amazing online experiences: “We’re usually aware of the gain, because we can feel what the gain is. The question is: What are we losing?” (Harrison, 2021). Note, too, how Kahn continuously asks questions in his narrative, a stark contrast to Zuckerberg’s ethos of having all the answers.

Thus, Kahn’s narrative contains constitutive elements that are remarkably similar to Zuckerberg’s. Both offer a problem as the driving force behind the striving towards a better future, in which we can lead more fulfilling lives. In both texts, current technology is presented as an obstacle, but where Zuckerberg presents the solution as uncritically further developing those technologies, Kahn asks whether they should not be reconsidered instead: “So here we are, with biological processes that have stayed largely the same mixed with a technological infrastructure that is happening at a pace that our evolution didn’t equip us to understand.” Thus, Kahn’s narrative becomes a warning rather than a promise. Note, that his narrative is not naively luddite: interestingly, as with Zuckerberg, online technology can help to achieve the object of a more immediate, connected life. The online community Kahn hopes to establish is instrumental to the conversation he is trying to instigate, as it can help with “forming a community of change agents that remember nature and don’t accept the things the way they are” (Harrison 2021). However, technology here only remains a means to an end, not as the Metaverse a self-contained solution.

This also becomes clear as we look to what the breach is in Kahn’s narrative. As we saw, in Zuckerberg’s narrative, the breach was the fact that technology has not reached its full potential – and therefore, humanity has not reached its full potential either. Interestingly, this is turned upside down by Kahn:

The current state of nature is dire and because of the declining human ability to connect to nature and the growing technological opportunity of escaping reality through our digital

devices, we are destroying our planet and accepting it as a reality for the next generations (Harrison, 2021).

Here, technology is doing very much what it is designed to do, but it is precisely that which keeps humanity from reaching its full potential.

What we want to show with this short analysis through contrasting is how it is indeed possible to hack a narrative and build a completely different story using more or less the same constitutive elements. Even though Kahn's narrative is not a direct hack of Zuckerberg's, it does show how a rearrangement of narrative programme, actantial model, and other narrative building stones such as narrative voice and the breach, can tilt the way in which a narrative negotiates values and, in this case, a future. Essential to this rearrangement is, we would argue, narrative genre. As Moenandar and Huisman (2017) have argued, the suggestion to shift from one genre to another can be a useful narrative intervention in career counselling, when a person feels stuck in a specific career narrative. Our strategic analysis suggests that the same is true for a locked-in future narrative. Zuckerberg's epic narrative mode valued, as we saw, constancy of self and control over our surroundings, which facilitated his technology-driven, teleological future narrative in which our drives and motivations to achieve that future are never questioned. Kahn's narrative, in contrast, is told in the narrative mode of what in the model given above is called a story of growth: a typical *Bildung* narrative (Moenandar, 2017a). This narrative mode values dialogue with one's surroundings and allowing oneself to change over time. As humans enter a dialogue with the non-human nature they are a part of, nature as a whole will improve. Kahn's narrative sketches an ideal of learning together through reflection. The narrative programme is a process of becoming in which a community of equals is established in which individuals achieve greater balance with themselves and the world around them.

#### 4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper, we have shown how on 28 October, 2021, in the context of an ongoing techlash, Zuckerberg sketched a future in which his company whose image was damaged by that techlash presented itself as a solution to one of the main problems associated with technology companies: loss of agency on the side of users. He did so by repeating a well-established rhetoric in which new media is presented as offering total immersion and, through this immersion, absolute agency. Through our narrative analysis, we teased out the constitutive elements that allowed him to present a future in which Meta will lead us to this desired end-goal

of total immersion, and the strategic ambiguity as to what the subject of his narrative is that allowed him to both promise agency for all, yet mostly claim agency for his company and, ultimately, himself.

We then contrasted Zuckerberg's dominant narrative with the possible counter-narrative of *Forgetting Nature. What is Environmental Amnesia*, showing how more or less the same constituent narrative elements can be used to produce a fundamentally different future narrative. The key to this rearrangement of elements was narrative genre: as the genre changed from one narrative to the other in our comparison of these single dialogical case studies, mastery over one's environment was replaced by dialogue with that environment, and relentlessly striving for an ultimate, inevitable endpoint was replaced by critical reflection on whether that endpoint is worthy of our striving.

The point of this comparison is not to show that Kahn's narrative is objectively better than Zuckerberg's, but to show that narratives can be hacked through rearrangement of their constituent elements. Especially in the case of narratives conveying dominant stories, this is a means to develop a critical stance towards those stories and create a starting point for counter-narration. Such counter-narration could also help to give the techlash more focus; although we have seen that the techlash has led to very real consequences, it remains still mostly a general feeling of unease. Strategic analysis such as the one presented here, may help to clarify what exactly it is that is creating this feeling of unease, and how it can be addressed.

As such, a strategic narrative analysis like the one presented here is a form of what has been called "applied narratology." Using the insights and findings of the academic study of narrative, such as Greimasian narratology and the genre typology we have used in our analysis, to improve practices of storytelling (Moenandar, 2018). In this case, that is the storytelling practice of narrating the future, and the improvement lies in an increased futures literacy. This also points the direction for possible future research, alongside more strategic analyses such as the one presented here, for instance of the future narratives that came about in the slipstream of Zuckerberg's speech, in which his vision of the metaverse was either further developed or countered. However, more applied studies would also be valuable, in which larger scale interventions are tested. Our aim with the present study was to provide a pilot to showcase how these could be undertaken. We already envisioned hackathons in which groups of experts hack narratives perpetuated by dominant agents such as the Big Five to create alternatives and thereby open up "locked-in" future narratives. This, by the way, could also be a useful educational tool in study programmes that train the future

employees of tech companies or, for instance, the creative industries. In both cases, the resulting counter-narratives of such hacking could become prototypes that can be further developed in collaboration with designers, communication professionals, and engineers.

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