

Afrofuturist Values for the Metaverse (Extended Abstract)

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This article proposes diverse speculative texts as generative sources of inspiration for the metaverse. Fiction writing and storytelling provide well-known sources of inspiration for people building the metaverse. However, the familiar cadre of texts routinely credited with inspiring the creation of virtual reality lacks diversity. By contrast, Black and Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) creatives have cultivated outlets of expression through speculative works of art, literature, film, television, and games, that serve as meditations on the experiences of marginalized communities and the kind of world these communities are collaborating to build. The fictional future is where community members, cultural workers, academics, policymakers and technologists can, quite literally, get on the same page. By analyzing critical, even dystopian, stories of how future technologies can negatively impact society, these disparate groups can collaborate to co-produce more ethical and sustainable technologies. The authors assembled an archive of thirty-nine speculative fiction texts including twenty Afrofuturist texts, two Latinx-futurist texts, seven Asian-futurist texts, six Indigenous-futurist, and four mainstream science fiction TV shows. We used inductive textual and visual analysis to, first, identify technologies present in each text and the conditions and contexts within which each technology was employed, and then to map these technologies to recurring themes across the archive. In these methods of analysis, the researcher reads/views texts and identifies themes first individually and then within and against other texts. Our analysis revealed three overarching themes that serve as recommendations for the creation and maintenance of a diverse and inclusive metaverse: Collective Power, Inclusive Engagement, and Cultural Specificity. We outline each recommendation through analysis of three Afrofuturist texts – Washington Black (Edugyan 2019), *Traveling While Black* (Williams 2019), and *Black Panther* (Coogler 2018) – and specify the undercurrents of collectivity and co-production that bind them together. BIPOC creatives utilize speculative fiction as a technology whose function is to communicate critical visions of the future entangled with complex histories and diverse contemporary perspectives. Engaging BIPOC communities to co-create the metaverse offers an opportunity to imagine how these immersive spaces can potentially bridge the digital divide, lead

to more accessible internet access and virtual tools, and ensure equitable representation and participation in the 3D internet. However, before engaging diverse communities, reading diverse speculative fiction can prepare industry professionals for the process of co-production. In the discussion section, the authors outline a suggested process for critically reading diverse speculative fiction. With these recommendations, creators will examine the many moving components of a diverse assortment of speculative fiction texts and learn what histories are embedded, concerns are shared, and communal goals are articulated before building technologies of their own. By engaging these creative works together, disparate groups, each holding a unique stake in our technological future, can collaboratively guide the public in imagining alternative frameworks for a more equitable future. We conclude by considering the power of cultural analysis to complement processes that are often structured as purely legal imperatives. These collaborative cultural interventions may help to shape democratic processes governing the future of AI.

References

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- Williams, R. 2019. *Travelling While Black*. Felix & Paul Studios.