

Digital Revolution: FASHION'S NEXT FRONTIER?

The coolest fashion designers right now are making clothes so cutting edge they don't actually exist in the physical world. But, asks Hannah-Rose Yee, is virtual-reality fashion a far-out fad or the sustainability-minded future of the industry?

Daria Simonova is an influencer, which means that two or three times a week she has to schlep herself – clad in a magazine-ready designer outfit – to a picturesque location and pose. Such is the trade-off for having a following of more than 53,500 people and the chance to wear Burberry and Louis Vuitton on the regular.

But all that schlepping takes its toll, which is why the Moscow native was intrigued when she learnt about an innovative new collection from a Scandi denim brand called Carlings. She could choose an outfit online, supply a full-length image of herself and Carlings would “fit” the pieces exclusively to her body. By this, Carlings meant that their team of designers would subtly tweak and refine an augmented-reality image of a pair of wide-leg jeans slashed with

neon lightning bolts and a blue puffer jacket onto Simonova's photograph.

These clothes don't exist – at least not in the real world. They were part of Carlings' “digital” collection, a world-first in the realm of fashion that offered 19 pieces of online-only clothes that could be tailored and instantly shared on social media. The pieces could be purchased by anyone, anywhere, of any size, given that they were fitted on a case-by-case basis directly onto a user's body, or rather, the image of their body.

This is fashion, so all of it came with a price. Those lightning-bolt jeans cost about \$32, and were accompanied with the following caveat: “This is a digital product that will be applied to your photo, you will not receive a physical version of this item.” The collection sold out in a week.

For influencers like Simonova, digital-only collections purpose-made for Instagram might be the next big

thing. Not only did the clothes look great – the denim with just the right amount of stiffness, that puffer jacket less Michelin Man and more Balenciaga circa 2016 – they were also essentially waste free. “Your digital wardrobe can be wider without harming the environment or your bank account,” Simonova says. “I believe that the future is all about digitising fashion.”

There are many who agree. Alongside Carlings, Dutch start-up The Fabricant is quietly innovating fashion with its virtual-only collections. Last May, a “digital couture” dress designed by The Fabricant's creative director Amber Jae Sooten, all pearlescent swirls and fluid silhouette, sold at auction for approximately \$14,000. To be clear, the lucky winner Mary Ren couldn't actually *wear* the dress, which her San Francisco-based CEO husband bought her as an “investment”. But she could parade it on Instagram, which is apparently just as important.



These clothes come with a caveat: “This is a digital product that will be applied to your photo, you will not receive a physical version of this item”

This is only the beginning for The Fabricant, who are currently working on an augmented reality (AR) product that will allow their customers to see themselves wearing their digital-only clothes in real time. Traditional fashion brands are taking note: Louis Vuitton has worked with video game *League of Legends* so that avatars can dress in clothes designed by Nicolas Ghesquière. Gucci, ASOS and Zara have all dabbled in technology that allows customers to “try” designs from the comfort of their own home.

That's the thing about digital fashion: it's futuristic in concept, but in reality the applications are more widespread than you might realise. The notion of wearing a pair of AR glasses that will enable you to change your outfit with the mere press of a button might seem a bit too *Blade Runner*. But have you ever visited the website of, say, Specsavers, with its virtual try-on function? You just used AR. Have you tested different shades of lipsticks or eyeshadows through a beauty brand's app? Thank you, AR.



FROM TOP A high-tech ensemble by digital-only fashion house The Fabricant; influencer Daria Simonova “wears” a virtual pair of jeans and puffer jacket by Carlings.

The leap between this and living in a world entirely comprised of virtual clothing might seem enormous, giant even. But for those working in digital fashion, it's only a matter of small steps.

"In the future, we believe that you will wear a comfortable outfit that fits really well and will monitor what your body needs," Slooten predicts. "Over that, you'll wear a layer of expression that is purely digital."

This digital expression, Slooten explains, can be whatever you dream it could be, courtesy of the combined powers of technology and imagination, and visible only to people wearing AR glasses or lenses. "It can be any type of material, any type of form. Maybe you want to wear a dress made out of water that is flowing all around you. That's going to be possible," Slooten says. "[It's] very far into the future," she adds quickly, but she believes that it's not only within the realm of possibility, but already in the pipeline.

The Fabricant's mission statement is sustainability: digital fashion that exists only in the virtual world is waste free. On a planet where Australians throw out 6000 kilograms of textiles every 10 minutes, it's an admirable cause. Virtual-reality fashion is also a great democratizer in the traditionally exclusive world of fashion. You could be anywhere, from Simonova's home in Moscow to the outback of Australia, and you can wear a piece of digital clothing. You can also be any size or shape, given that the garments are fitted expressly to your own image.

For Nixi Killick – an Australian fashion designer who hosted a pop-up store in Melbourne where customers could use an AR app to reveal design elements within each piece of clothing that were only visible through the prism of a smartphone – digital fashion is also about creativity. "AR allows us to imagine the most amazing things," Killick explains. "The scope for AR in fashion is endless."

Here's a riddle for you: why would a magazine editor with 27 years of experience, leave the world of luxury glossies behind? To get into digital fashion.

That's what Lucy Yeomans, former editor of *Porter*, did in February last year when she quit publishing to found Drest, a styling game that allows users to choose from a vast virtual wardrobe to build outfits for diverse



This futuristic design by Nixi Killick transforms when viewed through a smartphone app. ABOVE Mary Ren in a digitally manipulated image of her \$14,000 "outfit".

"The scope for augmented reality in fashion is endless"

– Nixi Killick, designer

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PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF CARLINGS; THE FABRICANT; DREST; NIXI KILICK; INSTAGRAM/@HIGHERTHANFASHION.

FROM TOP This AR protest T-shirt – shown here on both the digital shop and an influencer's social post – was designed to reduce the environmental impact of fashion; gaming app Drest is an accessible way to shop luxury items.

avatars. It was a shrewd move: gaming is slated to generate more than \$267 billion in profits by 2021. In Australia, almost half of all gamers are women.

Drest, which is set to launch in the coming months, has an impressive high-fashion pedigree. Brands including Gucci, Prada and Stella McCartney have all offered up virtual pieces for the platform, with e-retailer Farfetch providing users the chance to purchase their most-styled pieces directly from the game. Yeomans had a light-bulb moment back in her magazine days when a psychologist relayed the spending habits of millennials. "If someone had worn a dress just once, and been seen in it by their social community online, they did not want to wear it again," Yeomans explains. "Digital fashion offers a fun and exciting way to scratch that desire for newness and say something about your style in a sustainable way."

Gaming is probably the most widespread use of digital fashion today, but the potential is limitless, according to technology futurist Shara Evans. "It seems inevitable that we should use these technologies to our advantage," she says. "The only downsides are concerns about who would collect and store your [personal] information."

Australian influencer Talisa Sutton, on the other hand, is sceptical about just how revolutionary AR can be. For her, the ethical aspect of digital fashion is intriguing, but "is it really replacing this consumerist drive?" she muses. "Or is it creating a new culture of wanting more and more?"

The thing is, you still have to spend money on digital fashion, even if the pieces cost less than the fastest of fast fashion brands, purely so you can post them on your social media account – which could raise questions in itself. Plus, you forsake the tangible thrill of shopping. In the future, when we zip ourselves into a rotating roster of utilitarian jumpsuits to which our digital fashion choices are projected, will we still get the same feelings of excitement that we have when we run our fingers over a diaphanous chiffon dress or slip into a pair of caramel-smooth leather trousers? The real question is, what will happen to the visceral buzz of wearing a beautiful piece of clothing – how could the digital world possibly replace that? Does it even matter?

Slooten understands the hesitance. "But we've been doing fashion the same way for years and years," she stresses. "We need a new era that takes the planet into account."

With that in mind, on a bleak winter's night in London I head to Shoreditch to experience the world of AR for myself. The future of fashion is pink, in case you were wondering, in a warehouse lit up with millennial-toned neon lights. This is HOT: SECOND, a pop-up from fashion futurist Karinna Nobbs, where you can step into a booth that uses AR technology to project an outfit onto your body in real time. There are pieces from Carlings and The Fabricant to choose from, a Yohji Yamamoto jumpsuit and a parka by Christopher Raeburn.

I stand next to Nobbs as she tweaks the images onto my body, adjusting the size and fit of each piece. It's all a bit uncanny valley – the parka looks like someone pasted an image of the jacket directly onto a picture of me, like one of those cut-out paper dolls books. But for a second here and there, when Nobbs' tweaking is just right, I can see the appeal of digital fashion. Suddenly, I'm no longer in a draughty London warehouse in a pair of beaten-up sneakers. I'm wearing a rare piece of Japanese fashion history. Maybe I'm going to take it out on the town. Maybe I'm a character in a sci-fi movie about to save the world. The webcam flashes and a photograph is taken, winging its way to my inbox. A digital moment that will last forever.

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