ISSN 2657-4047 *(online)*

Editorial

Epistemology of the Virtual and the Real in Economics: The Diffusion of Interdisciplinarity

Radoslaw Miskiewicz

Abstract. This editorial addresses the evolving epistemological landscape of economics in the context of digitalisation, virtualisation, and the increasing interpenetration of disciplinary domains. It reflects on how the emergence of virtual economies—ranging from platform ecosystems and digital labour to metaverses, NFTs, and decentralised finance—necessitates a reassessment of the traditional boundaries between the "real" and the "virtual" in economic thought. As these domains become increasingly entangled, economic categories such as value, labour, capital, and consumption are being reconfigured within hybrid infrastructures that are simultaneously symbolic, technological, and material. The article explores the implications of this shift for economic theory, arguing that reflexivity and interdisciplinarity are no longer peripheral concerns, but central conditions for knowledge production. Drawing on developments in cultural studies, information theory, sociology, and law, the editorial examines how economic research is enriched by methodological pluralism and conceptual openness. It also considers the mechanisms through which interdisciplinary knowledge circulates—academic publishing, research networks, funding schemes, and policy discourse—while acknowledging structural and epistemological constraints that hinder integration. Finally, the editorial reflects on the role of journals such as *Virtual Economics* as platforms for epistemic experimentation and disciplinary renewal. It invites scholars from diverse fields to engage with the shifting boundaries of economic inquiry and to contribute to the construction of a more open, pluralistic, and digitally attuned economic science—one capable of grappling with the complexities of both the virtual and the real in the 21st century.

Keywords: epistemology; virtual; real; economics; diffusion; interdisciplinarity.

Author(s):

Radoslaw Miskiewicz
University of Szczecin, 22a Papieża Jana Pawła II Str, Szczecin, 70-453, Poland
Email: radoslaw.miskiewicz@usz.edu.pl
https://orcid.org/ 0000-0003-2370-4783

Citation: Miskiewicz, R. (2025). Epistemology of the Virtual and the Real in Economics: The Diffusion of Interdisciplinarity. *Virtual Economics, 8*(1), 7-15. https://doi.org/10.34021/ve.2025.08.01(1)

Received: 3 January 2025. Accepted: 15 January 2025.
© Author(s) 2025. Licensed under the **Creative Commons License - Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0)**

1. Introduction

In 2025, *Virtual Economics* expanded its disciplinary scope by including areas of the social sciences—*Cultural Studies* and *Health (social science)*—among its core subject categories. This development reflects a broader and more fundamental shift in the nature of economic knowledge itself: a transition from a discipline-bound perspective to an interdisciplinary field in which economics is increasingly understood not solely as a system of models, metrics, and formal dependencies, but as a complex socio-cultural phenomenon embedded in digital, virtual, and material contexts.

This expansion is not merely an editorial adjustment; it corresponds to the growing need to reconsider the epistemological foundations of economic science under conditions of accelerating scientific and technological progress and the exponential growth of digital capabilities. These developments challenge the once-stable boundaries between the "virtual" and the "real," the economic and the social, knowledge and its carriers. As such, the virtualisation of the economy not only transforms the object domain of the discipline but also alters its mode of existence as a form of scientific inquiry.

Contemporary economics is increasingly revealed to be interdisciplinary at its core. Even in its classical or so-called "pure" form, economic science was never entirely isolated. Historically, it has borrowed concepts and methods from philosophy, mathematics, sociology, psychology, and political theory. Today, in an environment marked by rising complexity, intensified interdependence, and dense systemic interconnections, the integration of knowledge is no longer optional—it is essential. This imperative is particularly evident in the digital era, where disciplinary boundaries blur and economic reality is shaped as much by servers and algorithms as by cultural symbols, social norms, and embodied experience.

Within this context, it becomes necessary to revisit the very notion of the "virtual." In the Latin tradition, *virtus* denoted virtue or ideal qualities, often associated with masculine strength and excellence. In Roman discourse, *virtualis* referred to potentiality—a form containing the possibility of becoming real. Thus, the virtual was not positioned in opposition to the real but was understood as its precondition. Over time, particularly through developments in modern and postmodern philosophy, the term "virtual" came to connote artificiality, simulation, or secondary status in relation to the real.

Today, this binary opposition is losing its force. Virtual economies—metaverses, digital platforms, cryptocurrencies, NFTs, game worlds—produce real value, generate employment, shape infrastructure, and demand new theoretical approaches. The virtual has become not only real but constitutive of the economic system. Conversely, the real is increasingly acquiring characteristics of the virtual: economic institutions and actions are algorithmically governed, symbolically mediated, and digitally structured. This gives rise to a field of tension in which the virtual and the real are not mutually exclusive, but co-productive of contemporary economic experience.

The purpose of this editorial is to articulate an epistemological question: how does interdisciplinary knowledge circulate within economics amid a shifting interplay between the real and the virtual? What epistemic frameworks enable us to describe this dynamic? What

concepts, methods, and forms of inquiry are needed to adequately grasp and interpret this emergent economic reality? These questions are not posed rhetorically, but analytically—they demand theoretical ambition, critical reflection, and open scholarly dialogue.

2. The Virtual and the Real: Reconstructing Economic Reality

Digitalisation, as a megatrend of recent decades, is transforming not only economic processes themselves, but also the fundamental ontological categories through which these processes are understood. In traditional economic thought, the "real" typically referred to the material—goods, productive resources, physical labour, and monetary flows recorded in tangible assets or documented transactions. However, within the framework of the digital economy, the boundary between the material and the immaterial is becoming increasingly fluid and porous.

Virtual economies now operate as fully-fledged systems of production, distribution, and consumption, generating both symbolic and monetary value. A paradigmatic example is the rise of virtual currencies and tokens, whose economic worth derives not from physical backing but from network effects, social legitimacy, and embedded algorithmic architectures. Game environments such as *World of Warcraft*, *Second Life*, and the metaverse *Decentraland* have developed into autonomous economic spaces with internal markets, employment, investment mechanisms, and even informal regulatory practices.

NFTs (non-fungible tokens) offer another illustration of how virtual assets have attained the status of not only economic units but also cultural artefacts. Their value is shaped less by material substance than by systems of belief, trend dynamics, platform infrastructures, and algorithmic operations. The same applies to digital platforms—such as Amazon, Uber, and Airbnb—where virtual interfaces mediate and coordinate real-world resources and labour forces.

This gives rise to a phenomenon that may be described as the ontological hybridisation of the economy, whereby the immaterial becomes economically significant, while the material grows increasingly dependent on digital layers of codification and control. Capital, labour, property, and consumption are all undergoing transformations under the influence of virtual factors. Labour, for instance, can exist as a fully remote, invisible, digitally executed activity that leaves no material trace, yet remains productive of value and embedded in global value chains.

Such a shift necessitates a fundamental reconsideration of what constitutes "economic reality." Where it was once conceived as an objective domain, measurable and subject to logical analysis, it is now more frequently viewed as a construct emerging at the intersection of infrastructures, codes, interactions, and interpretations. The real is no longer opposed to the virtual; it increasingly emerges as its extension and effect. The virtual, in turn, manifests as a productive force capable of structuring economic life, shaping agent behaviour, influencing institutions, and informing policy.

Within this reconstruction, it becomes possible to assert: the virtual is real insofar as it produces tangible effects; and the real becomes virtual to the extent that it is interpreted, governed, and enacted through digital mediations and symbolic systems.

3. Epistemological Shifts: From Positivism to Reflexivity

The transformation of economic reality brought about by digitalisation and virtualisation presents new demands on the theoretical and methodological foundations of economics as a discipline. Traditionally, economics has positioned itself as a positivist science, oriented towards objectivity, neutrality, and formal precision. Such an approach presupposes the existence of an external economic reality, independent of the observer, which can be captured through universal models and mathematical formulations.

However, the emergence of digital and virtual phenomena—ranging from platform ecosystems to metaverses and tokenised markets—exposes the limitations of classical positivism. These developments are not only difficult to reduce to quantitative formalisms; they are fundamentally contextual, multi-layered, socially constructed, and dynamically evolving. Economic agents no longer operate solely under conditions of rationality and perfect information but within environments that are digital, media-saturated, and algorithmically mediated, where symbolic, emotional, and cultural dimensions play a role equal to or greater than that of material incentives.

In response, reflexive, constructivist, and critical approaches have gained prominence. These approaches foreground:

- the contextual nature and multiplicity of economic rationalities;
- the role of language, culture, and media in shaping economic meaning;
- the inescapable presence of the observer and analyst in the production of knowledge.

The digital economy increasingly reveals itself as a domain in which the economic cannot be disentangled from the social and the technological. This necessitates active engagement with other disciplines—cultural studies, sociology, information theory, management science, and law. Platform economies, for example, cannot be understood without reference to concepts such as network effects, behavioural psychology, user interface design, and algorithmic governance. NFTs and cryptocurrencies require analytical frameworks that incorporate symbolic economies and communities of belief. Telemedicine and digital health systems create new intersections between economics, medical science, bioethics, and regulatory structures.

We are thus witnessing a shift away from a unified, mathematically reduced model of knowledge towards an epistemological stance attuned to the complexity, plurality, and contingency of contemporary economic reality. Reflexivity here is not a threat to scientific rigour, but a necessary condition for productive thinking in a digital and virtual world.

Moreover, these epistemological shifts extend beyond objects of study to methods of inquiry themselves. Economic theory increasingly draws upon narrative techniques, visualisation, simulation, interactive modelling, and big data analytics—tools that further reinforce the interdisciplinary nature of contemporary knowledge production.

Against this theoretical and methodological backdrop, the central question arises: how is interdisciplinary knowledge disseminated within economics? How does the discipline open

itself to external influences, adapt methods once considered foreign, and integrate alternative epistemological perspectives?

4. The Role of Interdisciplinarity in Understanding the Digital Economy

Against the backdrop of accelerating digitalisation and the expansion of virtual markets, it has become increasingly clear that contemporary economic phenomena cannot be adequately described within the confines of a single discipline. Today's economic processes unfold at the intersection of technologies, social practices, cultural codes, and algorithmically governed infrastructures. The deepening virtualisation of economic life intensifies the need to draw upon diverse bodies of knowledge—not only to account for emerging phenomena, but to understand the transformation of foundational categories such as labour, value, consumption, and subjectivity.

In this context, interdisciplinarity emerges not as an external supplement to economic theory but as a constitutive condition of its development. It is not a matter of merely borrowing terminology, but of forging deep connections between theoretical frameworks, methodological approaches, and epistemological assumptions. Such integration enables the analysis of phenomena that elude conventional economic instruments, from digital assets to user behaviour in platform-based environments.

This imperative is particularly evident in the analysis of economies taking shape within digital and virtual spaces. Game worlds, for instance, give rise to alternative economic realities, complete with labour markets, capital flows, and internal systems of exchange. Studying these environments requires not only microeconomic analysis, but also insight into game design, behavioural psychology, and theories of virtual worlds. Virtual goods—such as skins, avatars, and NFTs—carry symbolic value and operate within logics of gifting, status, and ritual; these dynamics defy explanation through rational choice theory alone and demand anthropological inquiry. Digital health platforms, telemedicine services, electronic medical records, and mental health applications represent new forms of economic organisation within healthcare. Understanding these systems calls for an integrated approach that spans economic theory, ethics, law, and digital technology. Similarly, consumer behaviour in digital environments, the construction of online identities, the culture of likes and subscriptions, and the influence of media ecosystems on economic preferences all necessitate a cultural perspective no less important than traditional economic modelling.

In this light, interdisciplinarity enables economics to respond to the challenges posed by an increasingly complex reality. It opens pathways for analysing phenomena that do not conform to established analytical paradigms and thus contributes to the emergence of new forms of scientific knowledge. This is not a temporary adaptation, but a long-term evolutionary trajectory for economics in the age of digital transformation.

5. Dissemination of Interdisciplinarity: Mechanisms and Constraints

The expansion of economics' epistemological horizons toward interdisciplinarity does not occur spontaneously. It is shaped by concrete mechanisms of an institutional, intellectual, and networked nature. The question is not only which types of knowledge can be integrated into

economic inquiry, but also how they circulate, gain acceptance, or face resistance within the academic community.

One of the most influential channels for the dissemination of interdisciplinary approaches is academic publishing. Journals, editorial policies, interdisciplinary special issues, and shifts in thematic and classificatory frameworks all influence which forms of research receive recognition and gain access to academic infrastructure. A notable example is the recent expansion of Virtual Economics to include social and cultural research domains—an effort to institutionalise interdisciplinary intersections within economic analysis.

A second key mechanism is the formation of research networks—both formal (consortia, laboratories, project teams) and informal (interdisciplinary communities in digital spaces, conference clusters, or collaborative partnerships). These networks serve as platforms for exchanging methodologies, conceptual frameworks, and theoretical orientations, facilitating the reconfiguration of disciplinary boundaries.

Research funding also plays a pivotal role. Grant programmes aimed at addressing transdisciplinary challenges—such as sustainable development, digital inequality, AI governance, or digital healthcare—encourage scholars to move beyond disciplinary silos and develop shared languages of inquiry.

An additional driver is public policy, where decisions made at national and international levels increasingly require integrated, system-level analysis rather than narrowly economic reasoning. In this context, economists are compelled to collaborate with experts in law, environmental science, medicine, culture, and digital technology—not merely for formal coordination, but to co-construct conceptual frameworks suited to complex global challenges.

However, the spread of interdisciplinarity faces several significant constraints—both structural and epistemological. Chief among these is the persistence of disciplinary silos: institutional and cultural barriers between academic domains, reinforced by systems of accreditation, citation metrics, and career advancement. Despite outward openness, economics often retains internal hierarchies of method and evidence that limit the acceptance of alternative models.

Another limiting factor concerns epistemological legitimacy. Not all forms of knowledge are recognised as "scientific" from the standpoint of economic orthodoxy. Narrative methods, qualitative research, case studies, empirical cultural analysis, or critical theory are still frequently viewed as peripheral or auxiliary compared to "rigorous" econometric approaches.

In addition, linguistic and methodological incompatibilities persist. Disparities in terminology, foundational assumptions, and evidentiary standards across disciplines create conceptual barriers. Even when institutional interest is present, scholars often face difficulties in translating ideas—not merely linguistically, but epistemologically and theoretically.

Thus, while interdisciplinarity is gaining momentum within economics, its dissemination remains uneven and fragmented. Overcoming these limitations requires more than administrative adjustments—it calls for a fundamental epistemological reconsideration of

research practice. This is a task not only for individual scholars, but also for journals, educational institutions, and research policy at large.

6. Meta-Level Dynamics: Reflexivity within the Discipline

The processes associated with the digital transformation of the economy, the virtualisation of markets, and the diffusion of interdisciplinarity affect not only the objects of academic inquiry but also economics itself as a mode of knowledge production. In this respect, what is required is not merely analytical engagement, but a reflexive turn—an effort to examine how the discipline responds to its own transformation.

An editorial such as this constitutes an act of reflexive intervention. It seeks not only to register shifts occurring within the research landscape but also to contribute to the redefinition of the epistemological foundations of the field. The argument here is that the challenges of the digital era cannot be addressed solely through the adaptation of existing models; rather, they demand a reconsideration of the logic underpinning theoretical frameworks, conceptual vocabularies, and the permissible boundaries of knowledge itself.

In this process, the scholarly journal plays a critical role as a platform for epistemic navigation. By expanding its subject categories and embracing research at the intersection of economics, sociology, cultural studies, management, medicine, and digital technologies, Virtual Economics does more than document disciplinary change—it actively participates in its institutionalisation. The journal becomes not merely a venue for academic publication, but a space for shaping new intellectual horizons: a forum in which experimental forms of analysis are tested, alternative methodologies are introduced, and connections are forged between diverse scholarly languages.

Such reflexivity entails an acknowledgment that disciplinary boundaries are neither fixed nor timeless, but contingent and historically situated. It also implies that knowledge is not a neutral or ahistorical product but one that is always formed within specific institutional, technological, and cultural contexts. In this light, the virtual economy is not only an object of research—it is also a mirror reflecting the underlying structure, assumptions, and limitations of economic science itself.

Meta-level reflection further enables a rethinking of the researcher's role: from detached observer to engaged participant, from bearer of universal truths to co-producer of contextually situated knowledge. This shift is particularly salient at a time when the phenomena under investigation—platforms, algorithms, digital traces—are themselves mediators of knowledge, shaping both user behaviour and scholarly activity.

The development of interdisciplinary and digitally attuned economic knowledge is thus inconceivable without deliberate reflexivity at the meta-level. What is needed is not only new concepts, but a new research ethic—one that is open to dialogue, experimentation, and epistemological uncertainty.

7. Conclusions

Economic science today faces not merely external changes within its object domain, but the imperative of a fundamental rethinking of its boundaries, methods, and foundational assumptions. The emergence and institutionalisation of virtual economies, the digitalisation of labour, capital, and consumption, and the convergence of economics with technology, culture, and the social sphere all necessitate new epistemological approaches—ones in which interdisciplinarity is no longer an option, but an imperative.

Contemporary economics evolves in conditions where the virtual and the real are inextricably entangled, and the boundaries between them increasingly indistinct. The virtual has become real in its productive capacity, system-forming role, and ability to generate new forms of value. The real, conversely, is ever more mediated by digital interfaces, algorithmic governance, and symbolic constructs. These developments call for flexible and responsive analytical tools capable of engaging with the complexity and multiplicity of economic reality.

Interdisciplinarity, in this context, becomes a strategy for epistemic survival in the face of rapid technological and social transformation. It enables not only the expansion of analytical tools but also the redefinition of the logic of scientific inquiry itself—incorporating cultural, legal, ethical, technological, and media-oriented perspectives. This is not merely the juxtaposition of disciplines, but the formation of a new kind of knowledge: hybrid, reflexive, and contextually embedded.

Journals such as *Virtual Economics* play a vital role in this process. They function not only as platforms for the dissemination of research findings but also as laboratories for developing new modes of theorisation. By expanding thematic boundaries, encouraging experimental work, and embracing emerging scholarly languages, such journals contribute to the creation of an academic environment equipped to confront the challenges of the digital era.

This editorial is an invitation to take part in that process. It calls upon scholars across disciplines to participate in shaping an open, pluralistic, and epistemologically adaptive economic science—one capable of engaging with both the virtual and the real, and of forging productive connections between them in the practice of research. We invite contributions not only in the form of publications, but as collaborative efforts to build a shared space of interdisciplinary thinking, essential for understanding and shaping the economies of the twenty-first century.

Author Contributions: Author has reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.