Metaverse – together alone?

The metaverse is an isolated experience that removes us from the world and fosters solitude rather than society. **Annmarie Hanlon** *writes that we must also consider the values of the platforms providing this virtual reality experience. Facebook even rebranded to Meta, but it has a history of ethical dilemmas. And that, she writes, is the devil we know. How will we assess new entrants and new platforms that arise?*

In Ray Bradbury's 1950 short story "The Veldt" he described a 'sentient hyper-realistic room' used by two children seeking entertainment. A decade later, Morton Heilig filed US patent #3,050,870 for the Sensorama Simulator, a multi-sensory enclosed cinema booth. Although "The Veldt" was science fiction, it warned against dependency on technology and replacing real life with virtual scenarios as it could result in tragic consequences. The Sensorama Simulator was the theatre of the future. An immersive booth moving beyond the sense of vision, it incorporated the senses of touch and smell to enrich the user's experience. These forerunners of a future *metaverse,* which is broadly defined as a highly immersive virtual world where people gather to socialize, play, and work, sought to transport communities to other worlds, but within the same physical space.

However, today's metaverse is an isolated experience. Removed from the world with the addition of goggles, the solitary user is situated in their virtual space with others in their own remote environments. Where the imaginary room in "The Veldt" and the Sensorama sought to embrace the experience collectively, the metaverse has taken a different turn, keeping users 'together apart,' or collaborating online while distancing.

In 2016, Facebook started planning the move towards a metaverse when its 10-year roadmap placed Facebook at the core of its ecosystem, with Instagram and Messenger classed as 'products' that were supported by artificial intelligence (AI), virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technologies. Placing the different products under a central brand, they rebranded to *Meta* in 2021. This could be seen as an attempt to place the organisation at the centre of new technological developments.

With VR, the focus is about creating an environment where the user is present, with added technology, which is why so many tech companies are on board with the concept. While VR has been defined as a form of telepresence within a real or simulated environment, blocking out the world with a headset fosters solitude rather than society. The communal gathering of a group to engage in a game is removed, as players participate alone and are inherently isolated.

The notion of a commercial metaverse is not new. An early version was Second Life, founded in 2003, where users could fashion their avatars, use nicknames, and engage with others online. Second Life was initially seen as an online community where brands could build stores, sell merchandise, and hold events. There were mixed reviews. There were no challenges to complete, no objectives to achieve, you could wander around aimlessly, buying brand merchandise or simply hanging out in bars. The lack of purpose as an interactive game, or just a place to pass the time, may be why its popularity waned. Plus, the lack of accessible tech such as the goggles and slow internet speeds hindered the development of VR for some years.

So, it wasn't until 2019 that VR headsets as we know them started to change. It had taken decades from the early prototypes to get to the commercially available Samsung Gear, Oculus Rift and Microsoft's first HoloLens, as technology has become smaller, cheaper, and easier to use, access to VR for wider audiences – beyond serious gamers, has started to become mainstream.

Today, a popular platform that provides the VR experience is [Decentraland](#). Like its predecessor Second Life, it's busy selling parcels of land in which many brands are willing to invest. Adidas has secured its plot, and customers can enter its virtual store and clothe themselves (virtually) in the Adidas brand. One example of how VR has been used commercially to wide acclaim is a collaboration between Fortnite, an online game and the pop star Ariana Grande. They joined forces to hold an online virtual concert and fans flocked to the games platform to engage in the virtual concert.

Running a concert in a games platform enhanced the connection between Ariana Grande and her fans, as well as generating an income of millions of dollars. There were greater opportunities for fans participating in the event, receiving personal welcome messages and having the chance to play in the same space as the superstar. Researchers have identified this enhanced feeling of online participation as [six dimensions of presence in virtual environments](#). These dimensions offer 'social richness' so the consumer becomes closer to the brand. Here, the notion of being transported to a place is more akin to the ideas proposed by Bradbury and Heilig.

Technology has improved from the initial attempts by Second Life (originally challenged by slower internet speeds) to make the environment feel real. Plus, the cost of headsets has also decreased. This has benefits for the travel sector–where a more immersive visit to another location is possible when planning a real-life experience. Another area that will benefit is healthcare, where the user can respond to external devices as medical professionals access patients remotely to perform certain procedures. A final example is Microsoft's HoloLens 2, a mixed-reality, head-mounted display that integrates into the environment, which means that it can be worn with spectacles or a hard hat if you're on a construction site.

Adapting the collective aspects of the metaverse could result in shared experiences which can benefit organisations and individuals. For example, Lockheed Martin, which has supported every mission to Mars in NASA history, wanted to ensure schoolchildren had a greater awareness of their brand when considering future job roles. So, they transformed a school bus driving to the Washington Science Fair where teenagers were going to explore potential jobs. The windows of the bus became giant VR screens and every turning in the street, every bump in the road, and every angle of the mission to Mars was choreographed—transporting the students onto the red planet. This was a collective experience that enabled the bus riders to experience the same events at the same time and resulted in STEM education for thousands of children. Imagine the delight of those on board collectively gasping in awe at the wonders and compare that to the yawning that would greet similar information presented in a classroom.

Yet where there are benefits, there are also challenges. Although buying goods at a concert in VR may be harmless pocket money spend, there are dangers lurking in the background as an eight-year-old buying a t-shirt at a concert may be able to buy alcohol. For example, Molson Coors has built a Miller Lite bar and other drinks brands are following suit in Decentraland. Even though you need to be 13 and over to access Fortnite and 18 or over to access Decentraland, we have seen how children can find ways around the age requirements.

In addition to users gaming the systems to gain access, we need to consider the values of the platforms too. When Facebook rebranded as Meta, on a mission to fly the first flag in this virtual world, were we asking a brand which has a previous history of ethical dilemmas to manage an environment where further issues will arise? Will we see a repeat of "The Veldt", where the children unwittingly create a virtual environment that destroys their parents? We need to have better management of these platforms and a better understanding of how they will address unacceptable behaviour. The platforms were slow to assist legitimate cases where data was needed, or where bad actors were inciting violence, so why will this be different? And that is the devil we know—how will we assess new entrants and new platforms that arise?

There will always be bad actors seeking to deceive users, protected through anonymous personas that disguise their real intent. It's how the platforms respond and how they will protect users and their data that will ensure the metaverse is a force for good, not the opening of a door to a malevolent underworld.

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