

In this metaverse or the next

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The metaverse is at the peak of its hype right now, however it has been developing and growing as a concept for decades.

- It will also take another couple of years (or decades) of evolution before we can really see where it goes.
- The vision of the metaverse being shared right now is just that – a vision.
- However, like the early days of the internet, where it ends up will likely be something fundamentally different to what we're discussing now.
- It is also a sprawling and unclearly defined space, which can (but doesn't have to) encompass related trends around web3, DAO's and NFT's.

Why it matters

Despite being early days, it is still a great time for brands to think about how they might (or might not) be part of the metaverse and its development, today and into the future. New technologies, behaviours and innovations are emerging, and we can learn from historic and current behaviour around metaverse-like experiences. It may offer inventive and rich ways for brands to connect with audiences. It may also teach us new ways to view experiences, and point towards an interesting evolution of media. It may also be none of these things – but still be worth being part of.

Takeaways

- The metaverse is not a new concept, nor is it fully realised – but brands can meaningfully engage with it and learn if they don't expect a fully formed bandwagon to jump on.
- The term metaverse paints a broad vision rather than a specific thing – namely of something virtual 'beyond' the real world, with enduring spaces, identity and experiences.

- The key features tend to include the tech to access the metaverse, the world of the metaverse, the avatar we use within it, the events and experiences happening there, and the economy, society and governance that runs it.
- It has largely evolved as part of the broader gaming experience and community – and one of the key tests will be whether this becomes more mainstream.
- There are key questions around who owns, controls, and creates the metaverse – while the term has been co-opted by Facebook/Meta, it is a collectively defined concept and space.
- The future of the metaverse is very much in flux – and it will be interesting to see where it ends up.

Not another “Welcome to the Metaverse” Piece...

There is a lot out there trying to explain what the Metaverse is, why it's interesting (or why it's not) and what brands should think or do about it.

This piece will attempt to summarise and add to the discussion in a balanced way. In short, the metaverse is not a new concept, but it is an interesting one that combines quite a few existing and emerging trends and behaviours. Brands can meaningfully get involved with it now, but it is not a fully formed bandwagon to jump on.

The Metaverse, as a concept, has been rather unceremoniously thrust into the limelight by Facebook appropriating the term and the concept.

In many ways, most of the components of the metaverse already exist. What we are really talking about is the integration of all those features and it becoming mainstream.

To see where it might go, we should look at where it came from, but also look at its precedents in the evolution of digital.

The Cyberspace Effect

One way of understanding the concept of the metaverse is to look at how the concept of Cyberspace was used in the late 90s. It was a vision of a potential future. It was optimistically embraced but also cynically derided. But at the time that people talked about 'cyberspace' the internet was barely functional.

As the internet as we know it evolved, the concept of cyberspace steered it and evolved. But ultimately the term cyberspace has fallen mostly into disuse. What we have today is informed by, but also very much different to the original concept of 'cyberspace'.

We could see the same with the concept of the metaverse. It describes a visionary evolution of our current digital lives. That vision may or may not come to pass. The term 'metaverse' may or may not be useful in the long-run and may well not survive.

To best prepare for this, it pays to be open-minded and enthusiastic but also keeping a foot in the realities of today and with a small dose of cautious cynicism.

Towards a definition

It comes from the Greek *Meta* meaning 'beyond' and *verse* short for 'Universe'. It is now generally used to mean a virtual or digital universe beyond or outside ours. It was originally coined in this usage in Neal Stephenson's 1992 book *Snow Crash*.

Meta is commonly used to mean referential to, but outside of something. Meta humour is humour from self-referentially commenting on something from outside of it. The 'meta' of a game, is the current way that players play it – so the meta experience beyond the game itself. Metaphysics is the philosophical study of the world beyond conventional physics.

The metaverse is typically taken to be *an evolution of the current digital world, with enduring and shared social spaces, immersive experiences, consistent identity and assets owned in the metaverse*.

The vision of this being that we have a shared virtual playground and sandbox in parallel to our physical lives.

Metaverse-like experiences already exist

There are many common components that often make up the vision of the metaverse. These include (but are not limited to):

- **Virtual reality / Augmented Reality / Mixed Reality:** the way we experience or access the metaverse *may* take place within whatever evolution of screens and digital experiences we see. For example, a common vision is that we will experience the full metaverse experience within virtual reality. As part of this Meta (ex-Facebook) purchased Oculus one of the leading VR technologies).
- **A virtual environment or world:** the world usually has some richness and fidelity. This can be a mirror to our real world, an extension of it, or a total fantasy. But the fact that people in the metaverse are in a shared space which they can interact with is a common feature.
- **Virtual identity that links to real identity, and tools for self-expression:** people have characters, avatars and often items, property, fashion within the metaverse. These identities and avatars give people a consistent person to interact as, and for others to interact with. (For example, building relationships would be difficult if everyone was anonymous or changed every time). The ability to change the avatar is seen as an extension of self-expression.
- **Virtual events and experiences:** while the metaverse could just be an open-ended experience to hang-out collectively, usually they are punctuated by some centrally or community organised events. Whether that's concerts, performances and weddings, or just regular meet-ups.
- **Alternative currency, infrastructure, and economy:** some form of ownership, exchange, and value within the metaverse – this can either be centrally controlled (like the economy in Fortnite and V-Bucks) or this is where the vision of Decentralised Finance, blockchain or web3 come in to allow for new and interesting forms of governance, ownership, and economy. This can allow brands to engage but also creators to earn more from their IP and their creations.

One of the main evolutions we are still waiting to see is the interoperability and convergence of these trends. While many smaller metaverse-like experiences exist, (Fortnite as a microcosm tick a lot of these boxes for example) while they remain as isolated experiences the broader vision of the metaverse will struggle to come to fruition. We won't want to have hundreds of avatars, wallets, logins and UX's to experience a whole range of different branded metaverse worlds.

A potted history of the metaverse

Gaming and social media have driven metaverse-lite elements over history. From the 90's and Ultima Online, one of the earliest massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), which saw virtual real-estate, economies, guilds and societies, gaming has pushed many of the elements of a virtual parallel world.

Second Life pioneered the broader societal and community vision of this. In many ways it was pioneering. While some folks are keen to make fun of the metaverse of today as just being 'Second Life 2.0', it is still a pretty pioneering vision. There were virtual parties, book launches, fashion shows and weddings within Second Life. It only ultimately failed due to technical and experience limitations and an overly frothy bubble of hype surrounding it.

But gaming has continued to carry the torch. EVE Online created a shared space, single-shared experience, with tens of thousands of simultaneous players, a fully player run economy and infrastructure. Spaceships worth thousands of dollars in real-money and epic espionage and real-world politics.

Minecraft and Roblox have both brought in new levels of creativity and user-generated experiences within their own metaverse-like spaces.

Then recently Fortnite has pioneered in-game events, cosmetics and experiences.

The gaming evolution of the metaverse has been huge. The big question now is to what extent this crosses over into non-gaming experiences.

Utopia vs Dystopia

There seem to be two camps around the future of the metaverse. A cynical dystopian one, and an optimists utopia. Both can be informative.

The cynical view sees this as a hyper monetised, distracting virtual world, where we escape the problems of the real world by engaging in facile escapist interactions controlled by tech oligarchs. That's certainly not the vision anyone would vote for (nor is it the lived experience of gamers today, although there are similarities). But it is the one often shown in media (Free Guy / Ready Player One) and shows where it could lead.

The optimistic view sees a landscape of possibilities. Where people can learn from, interact with and play with people in ever more meaningful and immersive ways. A parallel life that can enhance and augment everything we do. From learning to collaborating, to experiencing stories in new ways. There is also hope that this will be a chance to fix some of the troubles of the internet of today – redistributing power and giving control to creators. This is already happening in degrees. The main question is how widespread and fundamental this becomes. And a meaningful challenge around whether the problems it is solving really are the right ones.

The opportunity for brands

There have been some interesting and novel uses of metaverse-type behaviours already. From Gucci creating a branded world and looks in Roblox, to Marc Jacobs creating Animal Crossing fashion items, to ITV's I'm A

Celebrity and John Lewis virtual parallel competitions and games in Fortnite, or Netflix, Disney and Marvel launching new shows and extending popular franchises into the metaverse.

For the right brands there are already opportunities to play around and experiment in a metaverse-like space.

1. Creating a branded world or space within a world
2. Creating branded products, items or fashion within the metaverse
3. Creating an immersive event or experience in partnership with, or within a sandbox experience
4. Bringing together, or connecting, geographically distributed but culturally connected groups
5. Looking at paid partnerships to put your brand into popular spaces in the right way

If your objective is just to experiment and learn, then working with existing spaces and finding the right brand experience for your brand is a good place to start.

Similarly, if your objective is to reach an audience and have a definitive impact, then it's important to take a proper look at where the audience is, and how they will find your brand.

Brands would do well to look at their existing distinctive assets and brand objectives and think how (and indeed, if) these could extend meaningfully into a metaverse.

The easiest fit for brands are ones which align with existing metaverse pillars – for example if you are in the world of fashion, experiences, or have IP rich worlds, those would all extend more easily into the metaverse.

Most of the mainstream current examples of the metaverse are definitely games, and as such you will be reaching a gamer audience. That is a broad church, but it is not a universal one.

Similarly, the emerging web3 community is passionately playing (and enthusiastically speculating) in this space. It's an interesting audience to reach as a brand, but also a complex and insular one. They're quick to call out lazy or tone-deaf brand intrusions.

The pitfalls for brands

In short, people are not waiting for your brand to launch in the metaverse. If you build it, they still will (probably) not come. Building a metaverse world is very different to populating one. And there are not the common platforms or existing audience behaviours to make this a mainstream or commonplace behaviour.

Jumping on the bandwagon will unlikely do you major harm, but will potentially be a waste of budget and effort.

If you are still set on creating a metaverse-led experience, then make sure you have worked with the community you are launching within, that you have carved out the budget to publicise what you are doing and drive people to your space through PR, comms and partnerships. Be strict with yourself on what you want and expect to get from it.

Many exciting and challenging questions left to explore

There are also a lot of important and big questions. Who is building and owning the metaverse? Who gets a say in how it runs? How will it be regulated? How is it measured? How will people access it and when does it fit into

their lives?

These are all questions that will take several years to sound out. During that time what the metaverse is, and what we mean by it, may well evolve or become irrelevant. But it's interesting to understand it, and to be part of it.

Either way, look forward to seeing you, in this metaverse, or the next.

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