11 Events in the metaverse

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Introduction

The term 'metaverse', which is a combination of the prefix 'meta', used to imply transcending, with the word 'universe' (Lee, Braud et al., 2021) was first utilised within the science fiction novel *Snow Crash* (Stephenson, 1992) to describe a world where digital representations of the self – known as avatars – interact within a realistic three-dimensional (3D) virtual environment for the purposes of communication, entertainment, and research (Bardzell et al., 2006; Gursoy et al., 2022). Although *Snow Crash* is acknowledged as containing the first use of 'metaverse', the notion of the world described by Stephenson (1992) has recently entered common consciousness because of the rebranding of the social network Facebook as 'Meta', (Kim, 2021).

Organisations such as Meta and Microsoft have presented versions of a metaverse that include both social and professional experiences, involving avatars within virtual worlds, accessed through the use of virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR) and mixed reality (XR) technologies (Kemec, 2022; Ball, 2021). The ubiquitous nature of these organisations and their associated technologies creates the potential for the metaverse to be viewed as a singular destination, where the reality of physical and virtual worlds are seamlessly combined (Barrera & Shah, 2023), within an environment operated and owned by multi-national corporations. This notion of the metaverse can also be seen to be reflective of that described within the science fiction short story, *The Machine Stops*, written by E.M. Foster in 1909, where a large and complex global machine provides all of humanity's wants, needs and desires including access to music, entertainment, and social interaction (Gursoy et al., 2022).

Foster's (1909) vision of the future, echoes contemporary concerns that the market dominance of global technology companies could result in power imbalances and hidden costs impacting upon the development of the metaverse (Jungherr & Schlarb, 2022). This dystopian view of the potential metaverse highlights that there are and will be several challenges that need to be addressed as the technology develops. Specifically, concerns have been raised in relation to the provision of inadequate governance, the potential for breaches in data security, opportunities for un-regulated gambling, fraudulent activity, in the form of money laundering and wash trading as well as the abuse of marginalised and vulnerable groups, observed as incidents of racism and paedophilia (Boellstorf, 2015; Jamison & Glavish, 2022; Annison, 2022; Li et al., 2021; Merre, 2022). In relation to the latter, it

has been highlighted that within metaverse environments users are experiencing increasing levels of exposure to offensive and undesirable behaviour including harassment and the sexualisation of avatar interactions; with incidents of racism, bullying, the presentation of graphic sexual content, threats of violence and the grooming of minors occurring frequently (CCDH, 2022, Jamison & Glavish, 2022).

Due to concerns relating to safety and/or security there will be those who are reluctant to engage in the metaverse (Dwivedi et al., 2022a). However, as with the acceptance of the internet, there will also be early adopters, who have identified opportunities and want to explore the benefits of the technology; similarly to the development of the internet there are and will be entities that contribute more than others to the development of the metaverse (Terry & Skee, 2022). Therefore, it can be seen that the adoption of metaverse technologies is nascent (Wiles, 2022); and consequently, the companies who currently provide spaces or platforms where users can interact should be best placed to drive development and encourage the adoption of this technology. This will include organisations which hold dominant positions within society such as Alphabet/Google, Amazon, Apple, Meta, and Microsoft, as well as companies such as Epic who provide game engines, which facilitate the creation of virtual and digitally augmented environments (Jungherr & Schlarb, 2022). In addition, existing popular commercial metaverse platforms, such as The Sandbox, Decentraland, Mozilla Hubs, Facebook Horizon and VRChat provide opportunities for interaction (Li et al., 2021).

In addition to these extended reality platforms, applications such as Zoom, Google Meet and Microsoft Teams have been highlighted as tools used facilitate interactions, as have numerous virtual event platforms, designed to provide digital event experiences, such as VFairs, Hopin, Hubilo and Cvent (Yung et al., 2022; G2, 2023). Although this 'platform revolution' has been praised by economists due the potential financial benefits provided (Jungherr & Schlarb, 2022), the proliferation of platforms could be a barrier to engagement, as event professionals may be uncertain about which solution would provide the desired experience for attendees.

In attempting to define what the metaverse will become, it is important to note that it is not a singular destination that has been created by or can be claimed by a minority of multi-national corporations (Terry & Skee, 2022); neither is it a more immersive version of current internet technologies (Ball, 2022). It is stated that the metaverse will supersede the present-day online experiences (Herrman & Browning, 2021), extending beyond the microcosm of social platforms, online games and virtual worlds, currently accessed via online platforms, to become a collective of persistent, 3D digital destinations (Hern, 2022), where numerous virtual worlds are synthesized together (Gursoy et al., 2022). The individual environments will be differentiated by purpose and aesthetic style as well as by their approaches to governance, privacy, and data regulation; they will utilise differing payment systems and require interchangeable currency transactions for the purpose of purchasing of digital goods. Once established, participants will be able to seamlessly traverse this parallel reality, jumping between different locations using a single verifiable ID, whilst manifesting as digital representations of themselves, for the purposes of communication, work, and leisure (Ristband, 2022).