What Exactly Is the Metaverse?

HEARING TECHNOLOGY Some of the most prominent CEOs on the internet, such as Mark Zuckerberg and Satya Nadella, believe that the metaverse is the future of the internet. A computer game is another possibility. Or is it a version of Zoom that is less convenient and less effective? It's hard to put into words.

A rebranding to Meta and an emphasis on the impending "metaverse" was announced by Facebook over six months ago. Since then, time has passed nearly six months. The meaning of the phrase has not been elucidated in any way throughout these subsequent years. Some firms are giving little more than broken gaming environments with NFTs attached, while others, like Meta, are working on establishing a social network for virtual reality (VR), and Roblox is allowing the creation of user-generated video games.

It has been stated by proponents of the metaverse that the lack of coherence is caused by the fact that the metaverse is still being developed and that it is too new to define what it means. These proponents range from specialised start-ups' to tech behemoths. For instance, the internet was around in the 1970s, but not all concepts of what it would develop into were accurate at the time.

On the other hand, the idea of "the metaverse" is currently the subject of a great deal of marketing buzz (as well as financial investment). The decision made by Apple to restrict ad tracking has had a negative impact on the bottom line of the company, and Facebook, in particular, is in a particularly precarious situation as a result of this move. It is impossible to separate Facebook's vision of a future in which everyone has a digital wardrobe to browse from the fact that Facebook actually wants to make money selling virtual clothes. Facebook's vision of the

future is impossible to separate from Facebook's goal of making money selling virtual clothes. However, Facebook is not the only firm that has the potential to make monetary gain from the fervour that surrounds the metaverse.

What Is "Metaverse"?

Here's an exercise to illustrate how imprecise and convoluted "the metaverse" is: Replace "metaverse" with "cyberspace" Meaning doesn't change 90% of the time. The word refers to a broad (and frequently hypothetical) shift in how we engage with technology. The word may become obsolete as the technology it previously characterised becomes ubiquitous.

Virtual reality, defined by persistent virtual environments that exist even when you're not playing, and augmented reality mix digital and physical worlds. It doesn't require VR or AR to visit these locations. Virtual worlds, such as Fortnite, are calling themselves "the metaverse"

Many companies that have joined the metaverse anticipate a new digital economy where users may purchase and sell items. In idealised conceptions of the metaverse, you can transport virtual clothes or cars from one platform to another, albeit this is difficult. Some claim new technologies like NFTs can enable portable digital assets, however this isn't true. Moving goods from one video game or virtual environment to another is a complicated operation that no company can handle.

Microsoft and Meta are inventing virtual world interaction tech, but they're not alone. Nvidia, Unity, Roblox, Snap, and other huge firms are building the infrastructure to create better virtual worlds that resemble our physical lives.

Epic has purchased companies that develop or distribute digital materials to strengthen its Unreal Engine 5 platform. Unreal is a video gaming platform, but it's also used in movies and might make creating virtual experiences easier. Building digital worlds has seen tremendous advances.Still, a Ready Player One-like united location termed "the metaverse" is unlikely. Such an universe requires firms to cooperate in a way that isn't economical or desirable—Fortnite doesn't have much motive to provide players a link to World of Warcraft, even if it were easy—and the raw computational power needed for such an idea may be further away than we believe.

This has led to varied terminology. Companies and advocates now call any game or platform a "metaverse." By this concept, a VR concert app or video game are "metaverses." Some term it a "multiverse of metaverses" Maybe we're in a "hybrid-verse."

They can imply anything. Coca-Cola launched a "metaverse flavour" and Fortnite minigame. Rule-free.

At this point, most metaverse talks stall. We have a rudimentary idea of what we could call the metaverse if we define words correctly. We know which corporations are investing in the notion, but there's still no consensus after months. Meta thinks it will have phoney dwellings for hangouts. Microsoft suggests virtual conference rooms for training new hires or chatting with faraway co-workers.

These visions range from optimistic to fan fiction. Meta's original presentation on the metaverse presented a scenario in which a young woman is sitting on her couch looking through Instagram when she encounters a friend's video of a performance halfway around the world.The film then shifts to the show, where the woman is a

hologram. She can make eye contact with her pal, hear the concert, and see text over the stage. This looks cool, but it's not advertising a genuine or prospective product. It's the metaverse's biggest flaw.

Why do Metaverse holograms exist?

The internet began with a number of technological advancements, such as long-distance computer communication and hyperlinking. These technical features were utilised to develop abstract internet structures like webpages, apps, and social networks. Not to mention the convergence of non-internet interface advancements like monitors, keyboards, mouse, and touchscreens.

With the metaverse, new building blocks are in place, such as the ability to host hundreds of people in a single server instance (idealistic metaverse predictions assume this will grow to thousands or millions of people at once, but this may be overly optimistic) or motion-tracking tools that can distinguish where a person is looking or where their hands are. These new technologies feel futuristic.

There may be insurmountable obstacles. Microsoft and Meta often skip over how humans will engage with the metaverse in their futuristic movies. Most people get motion sickness or soreness from wearing VR headsets for too long. Augmented reality glasses confront a similar difficulty, plus how to use them without appearing like dorks. Many companies are now ignoring VR's accessibility issues.

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ADRIENNE How do tech businesses show off their tech without hefty headsets and goofy glasses? Their primary solution is to develop technologies from scratch. Meta's hologram? Even with modern technology, it's impossible.

Unlike motion-tracked digital avatars, which are janky but could get better, there's no janky way to have a 3D image appear in mid-air without precise controls. Ignore Iron Man. Perhaps these are images projected via glasses—both women in the demo video are wearing similar spectacles—but even that presupposes a lot about the physical capabilities of small glasses, which Snap can tell you isn't easy to solve.

This is common in metaverse video demos. Another Meta demo showed characters hovering in space; are they on an immersive aerial rig or seated at a desk? Is a hologram's face scanned with a headset? A person sometimes grabs virtual items with what appear to be their physical hands.

It raises more questions than it answers.

This is fine in moderation. Microsoft, Meta, and other companies that exhibit wild demos are trying to give an artistic sense of the future, not answer technical questions. It's a tradition dating back to AT&T's

display of a voice-controlled foldable phone that could delete individuals from photos and build 3D models.

In recent months, tech giants and start-ups' have pitched unrealistic metaverse fantasies. Chipotle's "metaverse" was a Roblox ad. "Metaverse" "real estate" is a buggy video game featuring virtual land tokens (which also glosses over the very real security and privacy issues with most popular NFTs right now).

People thought a 2017 video of a Walmart VR shopping demo was a metaverse demo when it started rising again in January 2022. It showed how much of the metaverse talk is hype. Walmart's VR demo flopped (and for good reason). Why should anyone assume Chipotle is the future?

This kind of wishful-thinking-as-tech-demo makes it challenging to predict which portions of the metaverse will become genuine. If VR and AR headgear become comfortable and cheap enough to wear daily, a virtual poker game with your buddies as robots and holograms in space could be close to reality. If not, you can play Tabletop Simulator on Discord.

How's the Metaverse?

To define the future metaverse, you must define away the present. We already have MMOs, virtual worlds, digital concerts, global video calls, online avatars, and commerce platforms. To sell these as a new vision of the world, they must have something new.

Snow Crash coined the term "metaverse" in 1992. Ready Player One depicts a VR world where everyone works, plays, and shops. Combined with the general pop culture idea of holograms and heads-up displays (basically anything Iron Man has used in his last 10 movies), these

stories serve as an imaginative reference point for what the metaverse could look like.

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This hype is more important to the metaverse than any technology. It's no surprise that people promoting NFTs—cryptographic tokens that can serve as digital ownership certificates—are also into the metaverse. NFTs are bad for the environment and the public blockchains they're built on have privacy and security issues, but if a tech company can argue they'll be the digital key to your Roblox mansion, then boom. You've turned your hobby of buying memes into internet infrastructure (and possibly increased the value of your cryptocurrency).

It's tempting to compare proto-metaverse ideas to the early internet and believe everything will get better and progress linearly, but that's not a given. There're no assurance people will want to work in a virtual office or play poker with Mark Zuckerberg, much less that VR and AR gear will become as prevalent as smartphones and PCs.

Since Facebook's makeover, "the metaverse" has been used to repackage old tech, oversell new tech, and attract speculative investors. Money flowing into an area doesn't guarantee a paradigm shift, as 3D TVs, Amazon's delivery drones, and Google Glass show. Failures litter the tech industry's history.

Not all is lost, though. Cheaper VR headsets like the Quest 2 are weaning off pricey desktop or console systems. Virtual worlds and video games are easier to develop. Photogrammetry, which creates digital 3D things from images or video, is a wonderful tool for digital artists.Futurism is vital to the tech industry. The future is more

profitable than a phone. Any true "metaverse" may be little more than VR games and digital avatars in Zoom calls, but largely the internet.