

The metaverse: Boon or bane for mankind?



Last month, Facebook, already under fire for its harmful content, announced a rebranding: The parent company will henceforth be known as “Meta”. Facebook will continue in its present incarnation for diehard adherents, but may soon seem as superannuated as the horse and buggy.

What is the metaverse? It’s a “place” (not *really*) where we’ll go for commerce, entertainment, and human interaction. You see, it’s virtual, which means it’s synthetic, a product of ingenious programming and advanced technology. *The Matrix*, anyone?

Forbes gushes: “The metaverse is coming, and it’s a very big deal... When it’s complete, our physical reality will merge with the digital universe.”

Faster internet and more sophisticated devices enable it. The pandemic lockdowns have accelerated it. Artificial intelligence and machine learning will help it perfectly mirror our tastes and preferences.

But just because we *can* does it mean we *should*?

I had an opportunity to watch Mark Zuckerberg’s full 117-minute rollout of the metaverse initiative. With unbridled enthusiasm, he pitches that the metaverse will be even more immersive than all current forms of entertainment and social media. It

will foster even higher degrees of “engagement” and offer new horizons for interaction, commerce, and creativity, employing hundreds of thousands of content creators. It’ll offer experiences heretofore unimagined. It’ll make our lives immeasurably richer.

Or as Zuckerberg puts it in his video: *“You’re going to be able to do anything you imagine . . . The metaverse will be the successor to the Internet . . . Step beyond the physical world, and into the kind of experiences we’re talking about.”*

You’ll be able to project yourself onto the surface of Mars, to the deepest depths of the oceans, to the summit of Mount Everest, or perform extraordinary feats of athleticism—merely by donning a virtual reality headset while sitting in the comfort of your living room.

With Meta’s newly designed wired glasses, you’ll walk down a familiar street and get historical information projected about the buildings you pass; you’ll stride across the terrain of Gettysburg and see the formations of combatants; a hike will take on new dimensions, as you touch your glasses and identify every tree and bird that enters your field of vision. This is called “augmented reality (AR)”.

Might we not envision a scenario where you’ll be able to walk into the local watering hole wearing your AR glasses, and scan the patrons seated at the bar? Your glasses, with face recognition, will dial up their personal information: What’s their net worth? Do they have a history of a sexually transmitted disease? What’s their relationship status? Are they taking psych medications? What’s their vaccination record?

Of course, AR might come at the price of seeing an enormous number of pop up ads. As you gaze admiringly at a sleek sports car, an ad might appear directing you the closest dealership. As Zuckerberg raves in his presentation: *“Whoa! Check out the ‘merch’ that just dropped!”*

The content delivered to you will be dictated by your tastes and preferences, already stored in the Cloud. The commercial opportunities are boundless and advertisers are gearing up to leverage the new technology.

The metaverse partakes heavily of the concept of “avatars”. Previously just the province of science fiction and advanced gaming, an avatar is a synthetic representation of oneself. You can enter a virtual business meeting, a chat room, or a gaming interaction with an enhanced representation of yourself. You can change eye color, hairstyle, clothes, even your race or gender simply by scrolling through a rich list of options.

What becomes of personhood when it’s no longer tethered to physical reality? Will “catfishing”, a practice by which people are unwittingly duped into romantic relationships with entirely made-up online partners, become the norm? What difference will it even make when you both have made up identities?

We already know about the addictive properties of gaming. And the allure of social media is an enormous timesuck, especially for the young; hours spent on the Internet are directly correlated with rates of depression, suicide and obesity. Recognizing the problem, China has already placed a three hour per week limit on video games for its young people.

The average adolescent now spends nearly eight hours per day staring at screens; children’s screen time doubled during the pandemic.

The neurotransmitter associated with craving and reward is dopamine. It's the basis for all addictions: food, sex, gambling, drugs, nicotine, and alcohol. It's highly invoked by scrolling, posting, and the payoff garnered by "likes" on social media. A recent book called **Dopamine Nation** posits that we're all in a state of dopamine exhaustion, which leads to cravings for ever-greater "highs", but ultimately leaves us depleted, depressed, and prey to pain syndromes. In the metaverse, we'll all be mainlining dopamine.

Sure there'll be positive medical and health applications of the metaverse. Teams of surgeons in different locations will cooperate virtually to perform robotic surgery on patients across continents; Medical students will perform virtual dissections, eliminating the need for cadavers; Patients with depression, pain, anxiety, PTSD or post-op will be soothed with calming, bucolic virtual reality vistas (imagine putting on your VR headset while sitting through chemotherapy!); Paralyzed patients will enjoy the mobility of mountain climbers, wide receivers, or marathoners, or simply enjoy a virtual tour of a museum or art gallery; Phobia treatments will safely acclimate patients to heights, or crowds, or spiders in VR simulations; Fitness applications, which have already been a godsend during lockdowns, will enable more realistic home workouts; Lonely people will obtain companionship from virtual pets without the need to change the kitty litter or take Rover for a walk.

Something to keep in perspective: Paleo humans were immersed in purely physical reality. They stared into campfires. That changed only in recent modern times with the advent of silent films, a form of artificial or enhanced reality, becoming increasingly compelling with the addition of sound and Technicolor in the mid-Twentieth Century. Then there was TV, that came to occupy an enormous amount of the waking hours of my generation of Baby Boomers.

Soon thereafter, social media and gaming amped up the engagement. It's now possible to spend the *majority* of our time in synthetic environments. And soon the metaverse will be upon us.

Is life going to become just one big simulation? Is this the kind of future world we want for our children and grandchildren? Do we even have a choice?