

# Maverick\* Research: Metaverses Will Be the Place With Empathy

Published 8 July 2022 - ID G00767568 - 12 min read

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Initiatives: [Technology Innovation](#)

The pursuit of equality has fallen far short in the real world. Going forward, people will go to metaverses, knowing they will find empathy. Technology innovation leaders must keep these design principles in mind when they are creating their vision for a better and more sustainable metaverse.

## Overview

### Specific Maverick Caution

This Maverick research breaks new ground by introducing the idea that empathy in a virtual world should come first to make metaverses successful. Its findings and advice should, therefore, be treated with caution.

### Maverick Findings

- A metaverse in the virtual world format is only an extension of our physical presence, using 3D visualization. Our flaws and humanness will not be carried over to a metaverse. There is nothing to change that, unless the design systems build in actual human behavioral aspects.
- A metaverse has the potential to be the place where disabilities and illness are not part of a person's identity. Everyone is treated the same way where their identity is not defined by traits like race, gender, education, disability or illness, unless desired.
- The use of positive emotion signals could promote inclusion of those underrepresented in the physical world.

### Maverick Recommendations

Technology innovation leaders should:

- Treat the metaverse virtual world purely as a place that is different from the real world, and strive to keep it that way.
- Design a metaverse with consideration for all abilities, using solutions like skeletal animation, rigging, eye-controlled feedback, 3D echolocation and haptic feedback.
- Start with including a diverse workforce into your design labs.
- Use debiasing techniques for training data at the inception stage of a metaverse world.

## Strategic Planning Assumptions

By 2027, 60% of the metaverse technology companies will have included empathy-related designs in their virtual worlds.

By 2026, 30% of the organizations in the world will have products and services ready for metaverses, up from a negligible percentage now.

## Maverick Research

Gartner Maverick\* research delivers breakthrough, disruptive and sometimes contradictory ideas that challenge conventional thinking. Formed in our research incubator, it is designed to explore alternative opportunities and risks that could influence your strategy.

## Analysis

In the context of this discussion, a metaverse includes virtual immersive experiences. Gartner defines a “metaverse” as a collective virtual shared space, created by the convergence of virtually enhanced physical and digital reality. A metaverse is persistent, providing enhanced immersive experiences.

## Virtual Meetings Fall Short in Fostering Social Connection

The post-COVID-19 world has shown us that pure virtual delivery of the way that humans connect will not succeed, as virtual meeting technologies fail the natural need for human connection. Currently, a metaverse is only an extension of the virtual experience in different designs. Metaverse designers must keep empathy at the center of their designs to enhance social connection and make it a positive experience for the user. To scale the usage and the potential benefits of a technology, metaverse designers must ensure a connection through humanized design, including the promotion of empathy. To run a parallel universe without a concerted focus on empathy, as it is being done today, would probably be OK for the short term with short-term business goals. In the longer term, it will probably not survive without empathetic designs that include behaviors to match emotions with other users or promote feeling safe in a virtual environment.

### Definition of “Empathy”

The definition of “empathy” encompasses a broad range of phenomena. These include caring for other people and having a desire to help them, experiencing emotions that match another person’s emotions, discerning what another person is thinking or feeling, and making less distinct the differences between the self and the other.

A metaverse could be treated as a place where everyone comes for positive thoughts and a happy place, and where people look for creative solutions to common problems that benefit all parties. In this scenario, a metaverse becomes a useful vehicle to build social connections and a sense of community.

[Download the board presentation to read together with this research](#)

## Metaverses Founded on Empathy Will Last

The bedrock of building a long-term metaverse is empathy. The negative news that comes out concerning safety features or harassment certainly don’t help with building it as a destination for community building.

Right now, emerging metaverses function as a place of escape where the user doesn’t want any connection with the real world. In that case, users would treat a metaverse purely as a place that is different from the real world and strive to keep it that way. However, that would be OK only for the short term.

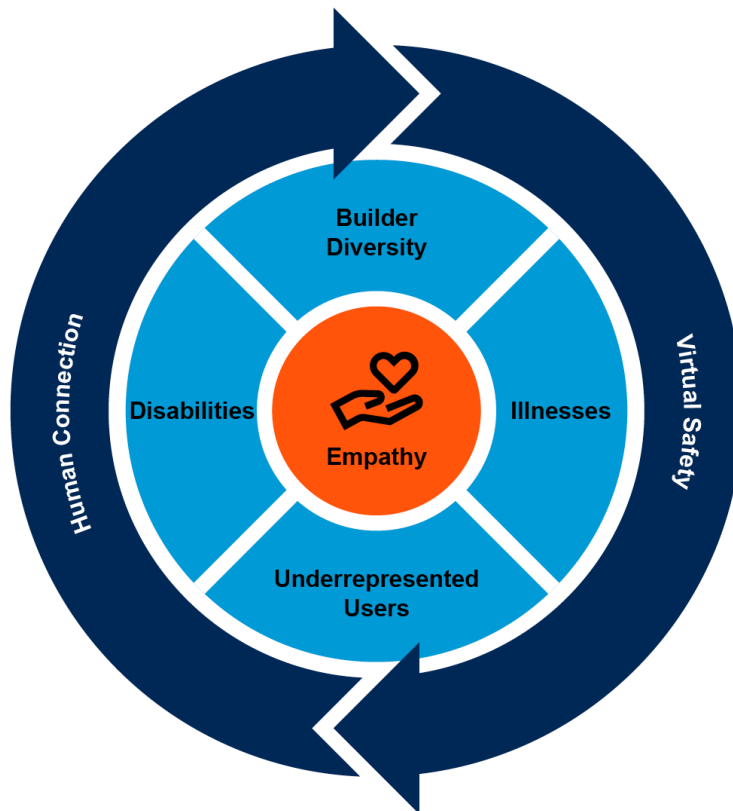
To run a parallel universe without a concerted focus on empathy would probably be OK for the short term with short-term business goals. In the long term, metaverses will probably not survive without empathetic designs. Instead of treating metaverses as a fad, companies should design metaverses with consideration for everyone — with empathy — which will make it exist 10, 30 or 50 years from now.

## Empathy Should Form the Bedrock of Metaverse Design

Two basic principles of metaverses make them empathetic by design — human connection and virtual safety (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Human Connection and Virtual Safety Support Empathy in Metaverses**

### Human Connection and Virtual Safety Support Empathy in Metaverses



Source: Gartner  
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**Gartner**

### Principle 1: Human Connection

We need and look for human connection in everything we do. The whole reason for designing a virtual world is to feel whom you are interacting with when you are online.

## **Design a Virtual Experience Where You Are as Connected as You Would Be to a Real Person in the Real World**

You want to create an experience that will embed empathy in all of the virtual designs you create, starting from how people interact with others in the metaverse (for example, embedding closed captioning for people with hearing issues <sup>1</sup>). Think about how to make it easy for people to share experiences and feelings.

### **Design Aspects of an Avatar to Make It More Real, Focusing on Traits Like Compassion and Altruism**

An avatar is an online representation of a user. This digital identity differs from person to person and can either be static or animated. Meta is, however, studying physical movements and then training virtual avatars using those studies. These studies are helping the model accurately predict things like shoulder and elbow positions based on where your headset and controllers are. Those studies would be helpful to make the avatar feel more realistic. In addition, metaverse creators need to focus on behavioral aspects like compassion and caring for other people when designing these virtual spaces.

### **Make Avatars Representative of Your Perceptive Empathetic Self**

Personas need to bring in understanding of body language and facial expressions. A fair bit is being done in this space to make the virtual avatars imitate the gestures and features of a real person and make it as realistic as possible. However, the design aspects should also focus on making the experience positive as that can help take it a step further. Think about how to physically code in someone's positive traits and identity and represent it on screen.

### **Principle 2: Virtual Safety**

We need to feel safe in any environment, especially if it's a new place. Without a sense of control in a virtual environment and lack of knowing who you are standing next to, it becomes hard to understand where you are and your sense of safety. <sup>2</sup>

### **Police Bad Behavior to Weed Out the Bad Actors**

There is no incentive currently to weed out bad actors, but metaverse builders need to work on how to protect users from bad behavior. There are numerous examples of incidents in which users experienced hate speech. On an ongoing basis, these will be a deterrent for users who want to have a good experience when they are in a virtual world. Builders must include a mechanism that disciplines users engaging in negative behavior, making them ineligible to participate online for specified periods or making them participate in programs that promote empathy. For example, bad actors are found and suspended or banned and have to go through some behavioral metaverse training.

## **Build a Standard Set of Rules to Police Bad Behavior**

People can currently report the user accounts when they experience bad behavior. However, policing is currently up to individual companies — they may each have their standards, but are lacking strong enforcement mechanisms. Create global standards, and monitor them for adherence. Allow users to set preferences for the types of acceptable interactions, based on personal behavioral preferences.

## **Enable Interoperability and Interdimensionality of Virtual Worlds With Ways to Share Information**

Another way would be to create an ecosystem where virtual worlds can freely share information between platforms. As a result, bad actors are reported on every platform, and they cannot avoid the consequences (similar to global know your customer rules and platforms).

Further to this discussion on making the metaverse expansive and inclusive, address real-world challenges that humans experience, including:

- **Disabilities** — The metaverse can be designed to consider conditions that limit a person's movements, senses and activities in the real world and make it possible for those experiencing disability to participate fully. Some solutions make content accessible for the visually impaired, like artificial intelligence (AI)-powered and eye-controlled avatar, <sup>3</sup> closed captioning for the hearing-impaired, and 3D echolocation and haptic feedback. <sup>4</sup> These are all possible ways to enable those experiencing disability in the real world to interact in the metaverse without impairment.

- **Illnesses** — The metaverse can be designed for people who are living with chronic and neurological conditions or life-threatening illness in the real world. The metaverse could bring in these segments of population by altering virtual reality (VR) design aspects. Immersive environments where participants can gain access to care and digital twins in the metaverse are two areas of innovation in clinical areas <sup>5</sup> being explored in the metaverse.
- **Builder diversity** — To create an inclusive metaverse, ensure diversity among those building it. Currently, only 30% of game developers are women. <sup>6</sup> If specific groups of people are not represented in the metaverse, we will lose the diversity that can be so powerful in creating a product where everyone wants to participate fully. Companies in the top quartile for gender diversity on executive teams are 25% more likely to have above-average profitability than their counterparts in the bottom quartile, according to a 2019 McKinsey report. <sup>7</sup>
- **Underrepresented users** — The metaverse presents an opportunity to include audiences who have historically been underrepresented from the creation stage. This applies to, for instance, geographic differences, race, gender identities, sexual orientation and religion. One example of how it can be done was implemented by Daz 3D with its nonfungible people. <sup>8</sup>

## Phenomena for an Empathetic Metaverse

Two phenomena can help design the metaverse with more empathetic criteria — self-other merging phenomenon and Proteus effect.

### Self-Other Merging Phenomenon

This is defined as empathetic concern, where you no longer see yourself and the person for whom you feel empathy as distinct, separate individuals. <sup>9,10</sup>

*Implication for building the metaverse* — When there are blurred boundaries between the self and others, it is easier to get immersed in the experience. In the real world, differences are emphasized. In the metaverse, there is an opportunity to erase differences. One action that can be taken specifically in the metaverse, and not in the real world, is to design the virtual avatar to represent the person that one *wants* to be. Creating conditions in which avatars must adhere to empathetic principles, can improve the potential of the self-other merging phenomenon and increase empathy in the behavior of individuals in the metaverse.

### Proteus Effect

This is defined as how people change their behavior in virtual worlds, based on the characteristics of their avatars, such as visual features. <sup>11,12</sup>

*Implication for building the metaverse* — People will behave according to what is expected or stereotypical behavior based on the appearance of their avatars. For instance, if you are taking on the role of a panda in a virtual world, you will fully take on the perceived characteristics of a panda like being shy or gentle.

Use self-other merging and Proteus effect phenomena to build in empathy as ground stakes. Design the metaverse to be a place with positive characteristics — with mutual empathy and avatars representing openness and inclusivity. Doing so will heighten the chance of participants staying when they are looking for a place to escape.

## The Pandemic Created an Inflection Point for Human Connection

Many realized during the pandemic how much they valued human connection and being in the physical presence of one another. And yet, we continue to experience dwindling attention spans and a lack of community feeling.

Currently, the metaverse that is being built with neither concern for empathy and human connection nor safety considerations can mean only that the metaverse will play out for the short term. What started as a place for people to connect will result in just another place where people feel unsafe and vulnerable. The metaverse will eventually be considered a fad. It will run its course and die.

Gartner believes a metaverse with built-in empathy and security considerations will create human connection, where people work, shop, bank, receive care and attend social events. In this scenario, the metaverse becomes a useful vehicle that can build social connections and a sense of community.

## Evidence

<sup>1</sup> [Powered by AI, New Automated Captions Are Helping People Receive News and Critical Updates](#), Tech at Meta.

<sup>2</sup> [Metaverse Harassment Doesn't Bode Well for Zuckerberg's VR Dreams](#), Bloomberg.

<sup>3</sup> [Building an Inclusive Metaverse Starts Now. Here's How](#), Davos Agenda, World Economic Forum.



<sup>4</sup> [What the Metaverse Means for Cultural Institutions & Their Digital Presence](#), Automatic Sync Technologies, a Verbit company.

<sup>5</sup> [Digital Health Enters the Metaverse](#), Rock Health.

<sup>6</sup> [Distribution of Game Developers Worldwide From 2014 to 2021, by Gender](#), Statista.

<sup>7</sup> [Diversity Wins: How Inclusion Matters](#), McKinsey.

<sup>8</sup> [Non-Fungible People by Daz 3D](#), OpenSea.

<sup>9</sup> C. D. Batson, K. Sager, E. Garst, M. Kang, K. Rubchinsky and K. Dawson, [Is Empathy-Induced Helping Due to Self-Other Merging?](#) Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1997.

<sup>10</sup> J. Decety and P. L. Jackson, [A Social-Neuroscience Perspective on Empathy](#), Current Directions in Psychological Science, 2006.

<sup>11</sup> N. Yee and J. Bailenson, [The Proteus Effect: The Effect of Transformed Self-Representation on Behavior](#), Human Communication Research, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Y. Bian, C. Zhou, Y. Tian, P. Wang and F. Gao, [The Proteus Effect: Influence of Avatar Appearance on Social Interaction in Virtual Environments](#), Communications in Computer and Information Science, 2015.

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