

Title: Metaverse article inside new game informer

Author: Lil_yung_Leo

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Holotech's Animaze is an advanced overlay that people can use on video calls or streams. And these aren't just simple overlays – they blink, and track your eyes, facial movements, and arms too. Sure, there's an element of fun to it all, but at the heart of what Holotech is trying to do is a desire to help people be who they want to be.

"I think that being able to overcome your anxiety by becoming somebody else is really important [in this digital age] and having a tool that enables people to do that is really important," Stanculescu says. "There's also the more philosophical side of things: what's real and what's better than real? We crave hyper-reality. It's why we prefer things with a brighter color. That's why we prefer sweet things. That's why we are so easily hooked on unnatural beauty standards that you do in Photoshop. These supernormal stimuli actually work very well in our brains and hyper-reality plucks those strings."

The metaverse so often veers into hyper-reality territory as a result of that stimuli, Stanculescu says. Animaze is there to meet people where that hyper-reality clicks for them. If they're more comfortable as a dragon in the metaverse, Animaze wants to have an avatar overlay ready for them.

"For me, this is progress towards a better form of communication that we can't do in our human form," he says.

The possibilities for what one person needs to obtain that connection versus another person are theoretically endless, and Eiche believes that's why there are 50 different "metaverses" out there right now,

Whose Metaverse Is It Anyway?

Microsoft Gaming CEO Phil Spencer sees metaverses as varying from one person to the next, too, although he's not quite sure if a metaverse is anything more than the virtual spaces we've been playing in for decades.

"I definitely see [the metaverse] as an extension of what gaming has been doing," Spencer told *The New York Times* in a recent interview. "I think as we look at the workplace going online [and] hybrid work environments, where we might have some of our coworkers together in one place [and] others that are on the other end of a call, we look at these virtual spaces and [apply] some of the things that we've learned in video games of people coming together ... to achieve tasks."

Spencer said that at Microsoft, the thinking on the metaverse is very much about taking what the company has already learned about online interaction and applying it to what the next evolution of, say, Microsoft Teams, might be. The Xbox head also believes that it's important to acknowledge that for many growing up today, video games are the place to seek and find social connection. Instead of playing on a playground after school, friends might meet up in an online game.

For the generation growing up with games, Spencer believes the metaverse will be a much easier concept to grasp. Take-Two Interactive CEO Strauss Zelnick would agree with Spencer's belief that video games already exist as metaverses.

Animaze is a video overlay software developed by Holotech. It allows users to transform themselves into various animal avatars during video calls or streams. The software includes a wide range of animal options, such as a shark, a bear, a deer, and a red panda, each with its own unique set of movements and expressions. The interface is user-friendly, with easy-to-use controls for adjusting the overlay and customizing the experience. Holotech's Animaze is designed to make video communication more fun and engaging, especially for those who may feel uncomfortable or self-conscious in their natural form.

"I would argue we're [Take-Two Interactive] probably the biggest metaverse company on Earth if you look in terms of revenue and profits because we're in Grand Theft Auto Online, which really, I think, defines the metaverse today," Zelnick told CNBC last November.

The Take-Two CEO is on board with video games existing as metaverses, but he's cautious of tech companies like Meta entering the space. He said he doesn't believe Meta's vision of the metaverse is what consumers want, adding that he's skeptical people want to conduct all of their usual daily tasks digitally.

Zelnick joins many others in the tech industry who are wary of where metaverse discussions are going, especially regarding Meta's vision of it. Even PlayStation creator Ken Kutaragi can't get behind the idea of a metaverse as it's envisioned by many today.

"You would rather be a polished avatar instead of your real self?" Kutaragi recently told Bloomberg. "That's essentially no different from anonymous message board sites. Headsets would isolate you from the real world, and I can't agree with that. Headsets are simply annoying."

While Kutaragi finds headsets like PSVR or the Meta Quest 2 annoying, others find some of their favorite video game experiences in them, like Owlchemy's Job Simulator. But just because someone enjoys a few hours in a VR video game doesn't mean they're ready to strap on that same headset all day to complete tasks like, "take the virtual dog out for a walk," "grab virtual coffee at the virtual coffee shop down the virtual street," or even the ever-so-exciting "complete work in a virtual office that work says is better than your home office."

Instead, Eiche points to Roblox as an example of where the idea of a metaverse is today.

"When I look at the metaverse, I look at it as a set of different kinds of things and existences and environments, or at least places where you could live," Eiche says. "Fortnite is an example of a space with a lot of different things, and Roblox too. You can even start to map some of the parallels between [what's] real and Roblox. If you ask me, is [the metaverse] the office? Eventually, it will be, but the thing that you think will be the office is just not going to work out because you're starting by bounding yourself. You're building a literal cubicle with walls around what you can do."



Digital Real Estate

For Sandbox co-founder and COO Sébastien Borget, who runs PIX-OWL INC, the metaverse is supposedly a sandbox where NFTs and blockchain-mined items can pass boundlessly from one thing to the next. The Sandbox is an MMO that readily uses the word "metaverse" to describe itself. It resembles Minecraft and The Tourist in graphics but is decidedly built around multiplayer interaction and relies heavily on the idea of NFTs and owning digital land, with receipts kept on the blockchain.

It's received millions in funding and has a sizeable player base, growing significantly in 2021 to reach more than 500,000. It has branding partners in Snoop Dogg, The Walking Dead, Atari, and over 100 more. Despite its lesser-known popularity in traditional gaming circles, it's a powerhouse in the world of NFT games.

Borget says The Sandbox is positioned as an open metaverse that enables users to "truly own" their digital assets and the creations they make.

"To us, the metaverse ... is essentially a digital parallel universe where users, human beings, will be engaging with more social, more immersive experiences through an avatar or 3D character that will be

a representation of itself," Borget says. "They will use that same avatar across multiple experiences, and to go a bit further, the metaverse is not a single company. In our opinion, it is not Meta. It's not Facebook. It's not Roblox. It's not Fortnite. It's a myriad of online virtual worlds. It's the plurality of them and this is the idea users can transfer their identity, their digital assets, their virtual belongings, their currency ... to different worlds."

As many have pointed out before, this doesn't consider developers, which are the most important aspect of this idea of the metaverse. In order for your favorite weapon skin from Valorant to work in Fortnite, as pushers of NFTs have envisioned, both Riot Games and Epic Games would need to communicate and work out the technicalities of bringing a skin designed for one game's weapon over to a completely different game. Not to mention, said skin would need to be turned into an NFT first, which is something it seems many developers would be opposed to doing on principle anyway. In short, this isn't a reality.

However, Borget believes The Sandbox is already on its way to doing that. And it is, but only within the confines of The Sandbox and cryptowallets.



PIXOWL INC. refers to The Sandbox as a metaverse and it's heavily reliant on the blockchain and non-fungible tokens

"How those [NFT] contents are then represented in any application... is up to a developer," Borget says.

"Up to a developer" is key, though, and it's why the cross-platform nature of NFTs and blockchain gaming usually doesn't get far. It also prompts the question: what developers are willing, and have the time, to open up a game's walls to allow content from this game or that into it?

That's a question The Sandbox and other companies diving into NFTs like EA, Ubisoft, Konami, and Square Enix will need to address. And then they'll need to answer the environmental aspect of NFTs and explain how their NFT moves aren't just a new form of microtransactions with a particularly sinister spin in the form of play-to-earn in some cases.

Despite Borget's positive outlook



In The Sandbox, players can purchase virtual plots of land and freely sell them to other players using cryptocurrency

on this idea of the metaverse, there's the inherently negative aspect of all this. Blockchain games and NFTs have drawn heavy criticism in the industry thus far due to their part in ongoing environmental damage. Plus, many view NFTs as scams, or at least scam-like in nature.

PDOOWL released a 2021 blog post last July that said after switching to Polygon's Layer 2, the game was able to reduce its carbon footprint of NFTs by up to 99-percent. As many have pointed out before, if a carbon footprint was already 200 times greater than what we as a society already create, decreasing said footprint by 100-fold doesn't necessarily mean it's good for the Earth - it's just not as bad for it as it used to be. And even if an NFT transaction is now green, there are still other concerns surrounding NFTs in general like true ownership, whether the content was stolen before it was minted, and more.

Eiche and many others are critical of the NFT-powered idea of the metaverse. There are two reasons why the metaverse persists decade after decade, according to Eiche, and the first is the idea of striving for a better connection. The second, though, is more cynical.

"It's an avenue for money, and it's the next big battleground for yours," Eiche says. "A company might say, 'Oh crap, we may not have won social media' or maybe you are a company that did win social media [Facebook/Meta] and you're like, 'Wow, we can't lose the next one,' right? That's the cynical answer."

Eiche homes in on something that every person *Game Informer* spoke to touched on: like it or hate it, the metaverse is going to happen. What it looks like is still unknown, and when it actually arrives is too, but as Pearson points out, it's going to keep coming around.

And it's likely to have a different definition each time. Like in the '90s and the 2000s that preceded it, the metaverse grows in concept alongside the expansion of the internet and gaming as we know it. Before we could tangibly enter virtual reality worlds, the metaverse was all about VR. Now that VR is here, the metaverse needs to be more. Who's to say that when we finally achieve the metaverse the '90s always hypothesized that it won't just as quickly grow stale, leaving users wanting more, much in the same way MMOs, websites, and social media platforms do today? The metaverse is a destination many are after, but as it stands today, it's nothing more than an endless chase. Which company crosses the finish line first will depend on whose definition of the metaverse we, the eventual userbase, agree upon. ■



QUICK TAKE

I'm deeply suspicious of how gaming may be commodified to fit into emerging ideas of a shared metaverse. Most current conceptualizations feel driven by business needs rather than enrichment of the play experience, which is seldom a good thing for end-users. Plus, I'm perfectly fine with keeping my fictional universes blissfully partitioned.

- MATT MILLER

Becoming Whoever Or Whatever You Want

Following the release of *Snow Crash*, the word "metaverse" was thrown around just as haphazardly as it is today. As it's defined in the novel, the Metaverse is a hyper-real digital world. So real that, for example, if your online avatar was hacked with a dangerous virus, you might experience actual brain damage. Companies like Makena Technologies and Immersions Corp. pitched their own ideas of that metaverse, with less brain damage, but technology in the '90s proved too primitive to bring it to life.

The idea subsided until innovations in the early 2000s, when games such as Second Life and PlayStation Home revitalized the discussion once again. By then, MMOs like World of Warcraft and EVE Online were in the hands of gamers and becoming more popular, and while metaverse discussion had calmed once more, the term "metaverse" could have easily been swapped with "MMO." Fast forward 19 years, and Pétursson is aware that the metaverse discussions of the '90s and then the 2000s are returning. And yet, he thinks we're still another 25 years off from the metaverse everyone pictures in their head.

While the term "metaverse" remains almost as nebulous as it has in years past, its potential to transform the world, or at least gaming, is evident.

"The idea of the metaverse is so attractive [because] it feels like something where you will have more agency, which is related to power," Pétursson says. "Why do people go and play games online? It's about the power fantasy. I cannot currently build a space empire [in real life]."

In EVE Online, though, he can and millions of players do because at the heart of the game is agency, the same agency that might prop up the metaverse one day. If you want to build a space empire in EVE Online, the skeleton needed to do that is there. If it doesn't interest you, there's plenty else you can do.



Job Simulator's virtual office, built as a game, looks somewhat similar to Meta's idea of a metaverse but is significantly more fun and appealing.

However, discussions about the metaverse such as this carry with them a sense of irony. The metaverse is about agency and power fantasies, and doing what you didn't think possible. Because the metaverse isn't really a thing beyond a buzz word Silicon Valley especially loves right now, you can say "the metaverse is this" or "the metaverse is that" and you'd be right, because it's whatever you want it to be. Considering video games have been providing us the stories and gameplay of people we wish we were (or weren't) for decades, the idea of the metaverse as it's largely viewed today makes us ask: is the

only difference between video games we all know and love and the metaverse a cheesy cyberpunk-esque headpiece that puts us into virtual reality? The more companies like Meta invest into the discourse, the more it certainly seems that way.

Andrew Eiche, the COO of Owlchemy Labs, the studio behind VR titles like Job Simulator, has a view similar to Pétursson's assessment of agency and why the idea of the metaverse is not just recurring, but powerful.

"People want to feel connected, right?" Eiche says. "I think the pandemic has accelerated this in that we understand the stark limitations of video chat [better than ever]. FaceTime was good enough, but now that we've really had to rely on it, we understand that there has to be something better, and I think the metaverse is a place right now where ... we can find that connection."

But our grandmothers aren't going to log in to something like EVE Online to gain a better connection to us. They probably need a different kind of user interface to feel what EVE Online players feel when playing together — something that realizes Holotech Studios Inc. co-founder and CEO Dragos-Florin Stanculescu's view of the metaverse: life as we already know it, enhanced by new technologies.



Depending on who you ask, CCP Games' EVE Online could be seen as a metaverse and at the heart of that is the agency the game provides its players.

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Depending on who you ask, the metaverse could be any number of things. For some, it's highly centralized around gaming, existing as an MMO-like experience. For others, it's a virtual workspace or a digital version of the world we already live in. The most commonly accepted version of the metaverse, though, is something that resembles *Ready Player One* where all of your favorite characters, friends, and family members interact with each other in a 3D virtual world. Or at least, that's the most idealized vision for what the metaverse could be.

Of course, that's not a reality at the moment and the closest something's come might be Epic's juggernaut free-to-play battle royale game, Fortnite. But long-running MMOs like CCP Games' EVE Online might be just as close to what the metaverse may become: a virtual world where players become entirely different people living completely different lives. They might be the commander of a space fleet igniting a war to colonize planets prime for resources, or they might be a simple trader on a peaceful planet.

For CCP CEO Hilmar Pétursson, conversations about the metaverse are nothing new. In conversation, you can sense the blasé outlook he has on the idea – not because he isn't interested in it, but because they are the same ideas he's heard shuffled in gaming circles since the 1992 release of *Snow Crash*, a foundational sci-fi novel that set a precedent (not necessarily the precedent) for what a metaverse could be, even going as far as to coin the word "metaverse."

"We basically had the whole concept of the [metaverse] in [*Snow Crash*]," Pétursson says. "It was the first wave of the metaverse hype, and there were plenty of companies doing this. What we were basically envisioning was to take the internet to 3D, the web being the 2D internet. Then we wanted to build the 3D internet in VR, and if you look at the latest kind of sparked dialogue around the word 'metaverse,' it is almost like nothing has changed."

Pétursson is alluding to an ongoing discourse that's been brewing for years, heightened when social media giant Facebook changed its name to Meta and highlighted a possible work-focused metaverse. Pétursson isn't interested in this concept. For him, the metaverse can be and should be so much more. *Game Informer* recently spoke to four different companies either developing metaverse games or developing game-related software. Despite different outlooks on the metaverse, there was one commonality; it's about agency.



Illustration:
Mónica Rexach Ortiz

