A new crypto firm wants to scan your eyeballs – should you look away?

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Worldcoin wants to prove I am "actually human". At least that is the explanation a staff member gives for a cryptocurrency venture scanning my eyeball in a London office building. Without the optical scan, Worldcoin will not verify your "humanness" – you could be a robot and you won't get any crypto. Welcome to financial security in the age of artificial intelligence. Concerns have been voiced about the privacy implications of Worldcoin, which was co-founded by Sam Altman, the chief executive of the ChatGPT developer OpenAI. Its ambitions are typically lofty for a crypto project. Altman and his fellow founder, Alex Blania, say it could "enable global democratic processes", and that the prosperity generated by AI could eventually fund a universal basic income. People interested in cryptocurrency are signing up to Worldcoin through the WorldApp. If you had signed up on Friday, you would have received a "genesis grant" of 25 Worldcoin tokens, equivalent to approximately £40. But to get verified after an initial sign-up, users need to have their eyes scanned by visiting a scanning "Orb". There are 1.5k Orbs in more than 35 cities worldwide, including in a building in Shoreditch, east London, and 2 million people have signed up so far, according to Worldcoin. Once you scan your eyeballs, a "World ID" is created, which Worldcoin describes as a digital passport that proves you are a unique and real person while remaining anonymous. You will be able to access your crypto wallet through your smartphone. The orbs, football-sized silver globes, are operated by Worldcoin staff, whose company shirt, instead of carrying a name badge, simply says: "a unique human". It takes about 15 seconds to become a certified human. A member of staff asks if you consent to the process and talks you through how the scan works. Then you have to affirm that you are 18 or older and consent to the terms and conditions. At this point, the Orb, which has a wide-angle camera and a telephoto camera to capture your iris, is placed about 20cm from your face and you watch a little ring light turn into a full circle and that is it – your account is verified. You receive a World ID that is Orb verified and your "proof of personhood". Your image is deleted unless you have consented to it being stored. It is important to note that the terms and conditions, unsurprisingly, are lengthy. While it is up to you to pause the process to read them, their length means it is unlikely people read every word as they get verified. "It's down to you to understand what's on it, and that you're comfortable accepting it," I am told by the Worldcoin staff. The extent of the staff's advice is limited to how to download the app, sign up and getting scanned. The terms and conditions state there will be no refund or compensation in the event of digital tokens being stolen by "hackers or other malicious groups", or if there is an "intentional or unintentional bug" on the open source software they use. The UK data watchdog, the Information Commissioner's Office, has said it will be "making further inquiries" about Worldcoin, while the privacy campaign group Big Brother Watch has flagged the risk of biometric data

being hacked or exploited. Madeleine Stone, a senior advocacy officer, told Reuters: "Digital ID systems increase state and corporate control over individuals' lives and rarely live up to the extraordinary benefits technocrats tend to attribute to them." Ed Lerant, 20, a game design student, took the train from Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire, to be scanned by the Shoreditch Orb. He views the iris scans as a simple verification process to stop "the bots taking advantage of crypto" and is focused on the financial benefits rather than the implications of a retina scan. "If I found a £50 note on the street, knowing it can turn into £5,000, I'll keep hold of it," he says.