

EXPLAINER: What is the metaverse and how will it work?

October 28 2021, by Matt O'brien and Kelvin Chan



In this Oct. 12, 2021 file photo, Hadrien Gurnel, software engineer EPFL's Laboratory for Experimental Museology (eM+) explores with a virtual reality helmet the most detailed 3D map of the universe with the virtual reality software VIRUP, Virtual Reality Universe Project developed by Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, in St-Sulpice near Lausanne, Switzerland. The term metaverse seems to be everywhere. Facebook is hiring thousands of engineers in Europe to work on it, while video game companies are outlining their long-term visions for what some consider the next big thing on the internet. Essentially, it's a world of

endless, interconnected virtual communities where people can meet, work and play. You can go to a virtual concert, take a trip online and try on digital clothing. But tech companies still have to figure out how to connect their online platforms. Credit: Laurent Gillieron/Keystone via AP

The term "metaverse" is the latest buzzword to capture the tech industry's imagination—so much so that one of the best-known internet platforms is rebranding to signal its embrace of the futuristic idea.

Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg's Thursday announcement that he's [changing his company's name](#) to Meta Platforms Inc., or Meta for short, might be the biggest thing to happen to the metaverse since science fiction writer Neal Stephenson coined the term for his 1992 novel "Snow Crash."

But Zuckerberg and his team are hardly the only tech visionaries with ideas on how the metaverse, which will employ a mix of virtual reality and other technologies, should take shape. And some who've been thinking about it for a while have concerns about a new world tied to a social media giant that could get access to even more personal data and is accused of failing to stop the proliferation of dangerous misinformation and [other online harms](#) that exacerbate real-world problems.

WHAT IS THE METAVERSE?

Think of it as the internet brought to life, or at least rendered in 3D. Zuckerberg has described it as a "virtual environment" you can go inside of—instead of just looking at on a screen. Essentially, it's a world of endless, interconnected virtual communities where people can meet, work and play, using virtual reality headsets, augmented reality glasses, smartphone apps or other devices.

It also will incorporate other aspects of online life such as shopping and social media, according to Victoria Petrock, an analyst who follows emerging technologies.

"It's the next evolution of connectivity where all of those things start to come together in a seamless, doppelganger universe, so you're living your virtual life the same way you're living your physical life," she said.

WHAT WILL I BE ABLE TO DO IN THE METAVERSE?



In this Thursday, May 13, 2021 file photo, a view of a Gucci advertisement campaign selected for an exhibition to celebrate the vision of Gucci's creative director Alessandro Michele at the Gucci Garden Archetypes, in Florence, Italy. The term metaverse seems to be everywhere. Facebook is hiring thousands of engineers in Europe to work on it, while video game companies are outlining

their long-term visions for what some consider the next big thing on the internet. Essentially, it's a world of endless, interconnected virtual communities where people can meet, work and play. You can go to a virtual concert, take a trip online and try on digital clothing. But tech companies still have to figure out how to connect their online platforms. Credit: AP Photo/Antonio Calanni, File

Things like go to a virtual concert, take a trip online, view or create artwork and try on or buy digital clothing.

The metaverse also could be a game-changer for the work-from-home shift amid the coronavirus pandemic. Instead of seeing co-workers on a video call grid, employees could join them in a virtual office.

Facebook has launched meeting software for companies, called Horizon Workrooms, to use with its Oculus VR headsets, though early reviews have not been great. The headsets cost \$300 or more, putting the metaverse's most cutting-edge experiences out of reach for many.

For those who can afford it, users would be able, through their avatars, to flit between virtual worlds created by different companies.

"A lot of the metaverse experience is going to be around being able to teleport from one experience to another," Zuckerberg says.

Tech companies still have to figure out how to connect their online platforms to each other. Making it work will require competing technology platforms to agree on a set of standards, so there aren't "people in the Facebook metaverse and other people in the Microsoft metaverse," Petrock said.

IS FACEBOOK GOING ALL IN ON THE METAVERSE?

Zuckerberg is going big on what he sees as the next generation of the internet because he thinks it's going to be a big part of the digital economy.



In this July 29, 2020 file photo, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg testifies remotely during a House Judiciary subcommittee on antitrust on Capitol Hill, in Washington. The term metaverse seems to be everywhere. Facebook is hiring thousands of engineers in Europe to work on it, while video game companies are outlining their long-term visions for what some consider the next big thing on the internet. Essentially, it's a world of endless, interconnected virtual communities where people can meet, work and play. You can go to a virtual concert, take a trip online and try on digital clothing. But tech companies still have to figure out how to connect their online platforms. Credit: Mandel Ngan/Pool via AP

Critics wonder if the potential pivot could be an effort to distract from the company's crises, including antitrust crackdowns, testimony by [whistleblowing former employees](#) and concerns about its handling of misinformation.

Former employee Frances Haugen has accused Facebook's platforms of harming children and inciting political violence after copying internal research documents and turning them over to the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission.

They also were provided to a group of media outlets, including The Associated Press, which reported numerous stories about how Facebook prioritized profits over safety and hid its own research from investors and the public.

IS THE METAVERSE JUST A FACEBOOK PROJECT?

No. Other companies talking up the metaverse include Microsoft and chipmaker Nvidia.

"We think there's going to be lots of companies building virtual worlds and environments in the metaverse, in the same way there's been lots of companies doing things on the World Wide Web," said Richard Kerris, vice president of Nvidia's Omniverse platform. "It's important to be open and extensible, so you can teleport to different worlds whether it's by one company or another company, the same way I go from one web page to another web page."

Video game companies also are taking a leading role. Epic Games, the company behind the popular Fortnite video game, has raised \$1 billion from investors to help with its long-term plans for building the metaverse. Game platform Roblox is another big player, outlining its vision of the metaverse as a place where "people can come together

within millions of 3D experiences to learn, work, play, create and socialize."

Consumer brands are trying to jump on the trend, too. Italian fashion house Gucci collaborated in June with Roblox to sell a collection of digital-only accessories. Coca-Cola and Clinique have sold digital tokens pitched as a stepping stone to the metaverse.



Facebook unveiled their new Meta sign at the company headquarters in Menlo Park, Calif., Thursday, Oct. 28, 2021. An embattled Facebook Inc. is changing its name to Meta Platforms Inc., or Meta for short, to reflect what CEO Mark Zuckerberg says is its commitment to developing the new surround-yourself technology known as the "metaverse." But the social network itself will still be called Facebook. Credit: AP Photo/Tony Avelar

WILL THIS BE ANOTHER WAY TO GET MORE OF MY DATA?

Zuckerberg's embrace of the metaverse in some ways contradicts a central tenet of its biggest enthusiasts. They envision the metaverse as online culture's liberation from tech platforms like Facebook that assumed ownership of people's accounts, photos, posts and playlists and traded off what they gleaned from that data.

"We want to be able to move around the internet with ease, but we also want to be able to move around the internet in a way we're not tracked and monitored," said venture capitalist Steve Jang, a managing partner at Kindred Ventures who focuses on cryptocurrency technology.

It seems clear that Facebook wants to carry its business model, which is based on using personal data to sell targeted advertising, into the metaverse.

"Ads are going to continue being an important part of the strategy across the social media parts of what we do, and it will probably be a meaningful part of the metaverse, too," Zuckerberg said in a recent company earnings call.

Petrock she said she's concerned about Facebook trying to lead the way into a virtual world that could require even more personal data and offer greater potential for abuse and misinformation when it hasn't fixed those problems in its current platforms.

This article has been corrected to note that while the Mark Zuckerberg quote in the penultimate paragraph came from a recent company earnings call, it was not the most recent one.

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