

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

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An attendee stands between cameras used to live broadcast into the metaverse during a Sony news conference before the start of the CES tech show Wednesday, Jan. 4, 2023, in Las Vegas. Credit: AP Photo/John Locher

The term "metaverse" is the latest buzzword to capture the tech

industry's imagination—and while Facebook parent Meta is the best-known entrant into this futuristic virtual concept, it's certainly not the only one.

Mark Zuckerberg's all-in embrace—including renaming his [company](#) and investing tens of billions of dollars—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.

At this year's CES, the [tech industry](#) showcase in Las Vegas, the metaverse is a "key theme," said Kinsey Fabrizio, [senior vice president](#) at the trade group Consumer Technology Association. She pointed to automaker Stellantis and software giant Microsoft, which have a partnership to create a showroom in the metaverse. Another company, OVR, lets people smell the metaverse.

As with any [emerging technology](#), there are plenty of concerns around the metaverse, including whether it could allow big tech companies access to even more personal data, or contribute to the spread of hate and misinformation along with other online harms that exacerbate real-world problems. Then there are those goggles. For now, anyone who wants to enter the metaverse must wear a [virtual reality headset](#)—an immediate deal breaker for some people.

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?

Things like going to a virtual concert, taking a trip online, and buying and trying on digital clothing.

The metaverse also could be a game-changer for the work-from-home shift that has evolved from the coronavirus pandemic. Instead of seeing co-workers on a video call grid, employees could see them virtually.

Those who can afford the VR headsets that cost at least hundreds of dollars—and want to wear them, of course—would be able, through their avatars, to flit between virtual worlds created by different companies.

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 as well.

IS THE METAVERSE JUST A META PROJECT?

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

economy. But he has acknowledged that "no one company" will build the metaverse by itself.

Other companies talking up the metaverse include Microsoft and chipmaker Nvidia, along with a bevy of startups.

"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.

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.

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