

Metaverse in spotlight at MWC tech fair even as doubts arise

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Visitors test a SK Telecom VR flight simulator during the Mobile World Congress 2023 in Barcelona, Spain, Monday, Feb. 27, 2023. The four-day show kicks off Monday in a vast Barcelona conference center. It's the world's biggest and most influential meeting for the mobile tech industry. Credit: AP Photo/Joan Mateu Parra

I climbed into the front seat of the air taxi, buckled the seat belt and braced as the aircraft lifted off. The futuristic cityscape of Busan, South Korea, dropped away, and a digital avatar popped up on the windscreen with a message.

I couldn't answer as a wave of motion sickness hit me. The virtual reality goggles combined with motion-simulating seats pitching back and forth and side to side made it feel like I was actually hovering and maneuvering in the air. They also made me so nauseous I had to close my eyes for the rest of the three-minute journey.

[Welcome to the metaverse](#)—sort of.

South Korean company SK Telecom's air taxi mockup was one of the [eye-catching demonstrations at MWC](#), or Mobile World Congress, the world's biggest telecom industry trade show. Tech companies and wireless carriers at [this week's expo in Barcelona](#) displayed advancements to connect people and businesses online, increasingly in new virtual reality worlds dubbed the metaverse.

Visitor Mark Varahona also felt woozy after trying the flight experience but is still considering buying a virtual reality headset, the hardware needed to enter any immersive digital universe.

"I was thinking to buy it before coming here. And maybe now I will buy them," he said. "They look quite nice."

The metaverse exploded in popularity after Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg in late 2021 pronounced it the next big thing for the internet, renaming his social media empire and socking tens of billions into the idea.

He portrayed it as 3D community where people can meet, work and

play—doing everything from trying on digital clothes, holding a virtual meeting or taking a trip online.



A visitor tests a GSMA VR simulator during the Mobile World Congress 2023 in Barcelona, Spain, Tuesday, Feb. 28, 2023. After three years of pandemic disruption, MWC, also known as Mobile World Congress, kicked off Monday in Barcelona, Spain, with mobile phone makers showing off new devices and telecom industry executives perusing the latest networking gear and software. Credit: AP Photo/Joan Mateu Parra

But doubts about the viability of the metaverse have been creeping in as the initial hype wears off. Sales of virtual reality headsets in the U.S. slipped 2% by December from the previous year, according to NPD

Research. Reality Labs, which makes Meta Quest headsets, [posted an operating loss of \\$13.7 billion](#) in 2022.

Meta has said it plans to hire 10,000 engineers in Europe to work on the metaverse. When asked for an update, the company said, "Our expansion in Europe was always a long-term one planned over a number of years. We remain committed to Europe."

The "metaverse has not gone away," said Ben Wood, principal analyst at CCS Insight. "But I think there's a lot more skepticism about what role it's going to play, particularly in the consumer domain beyond the obvious areas of things like gaming."

The definition of the metaverse has been hard to pin down, adding to the skepticism. It is not the same as virtual reality and its cousin, augmented reality, said Tuong Nguyen, a Gartner analyst specializing in emerging technologies.

"So AR and VR very closely related to the metaverse in the same way that computers are related to the Internet," he said. "Think of it instead as evolution of the Internet, which changes the way that we interact with the world."

So how should SK Telecom's flight simulator be defined?

"Technically, it's not metaverse, but kind of metaverse," said Ken Wohn, a company manager.

South Korea's biggest telecom provider teamed up last year with California's Joby Aviation to develop an electric air taxi service to the country.



A Orange employee dances during a 5G metaverse dance simulation at the Mobile World Congress 2023 in Barcelona, Spain, Tuesday, Feb. 28, 2023. After three years of pandemic disruption, MWC, also known as Mobile World Congress, kicked off Monday in Barcelona, Spain, with mobile phone makers showing off new devices and telecom industry executives perusing the latest networking gear and software. Credit: AP Photo/Joan Mateu Parra

One day the air taxis might operate autonomously, using high-speed 5G wireless connections, Wohn said.

It was a different experience at French wireless company Orange's [metaverse demonstration](#), where users were transported to a futuristic neon-hued technoscape with lightning bolts, giant robots and a falcon carrying a green orb in its talons.

A dancing figure appeared, representing the movements of a real-life dancer wearing motion-capture gear. It was a dazzling display, though what consumer purpose it had was not immediately clear.

Miguel Angel Almonacid, Orange's network strategy director for Spain, said it demonstrates how [new 5G networks](#) will eliminate lag for metaverse users watching something happening far away.

The metaverse might be more suited to practical purposes in the workplace, analysts said.

"That's where we'll see traction first because the barriers aren't as high," said Gartner's Nguyen. For example, a worker could use augmented reality glasses to pull up diagnostics or an instruction manual.

Spanish startup La Frontera uses the metaverse to provide virtual meetings with "realistic avatars," Marta Ortiz, a business development executive, said as she guided me through the company's metaverse.

We arrived first on a beach, with boulders, palm trees and a light blue sea. Her avatar appeared, a head and shoulders with disembodied hands hovering in front of her chest. We entered a nearby conference room with a boardroom table, where I used handheld controllers to pick up 3D objects like a toy ray gun and a bottle of Champagne.



Orange worker tests 5G XR digital twin robot control with VR Glasses during the Mobile World Congress 2023 in Barcelona, Spain, Wednesday, March 1, 2023. After three years of pandemic disruption, the MWC kicked off Monday in Barcelona, Spain, with mobile phone makers showing off new devices and telecom industry executives perusing the latest networking gear and software. Credit: AP Photo/Joan Mateu Parra

Other metaverse applications include training for risky, repetitive or highly detailed procedures, like surgery.

The beach disappeared, replaced by an overturned tanker truck on fire. A fire extinguisher hung in midair. Ortiz told me to grab it with my virtual hand and spray it at the flames, which started to die down.

The virtual world also could be useful for showcasing products too big to move easily, like private jets.

Or they could be too small for humans.

The scene changed to a sci-fi setting, with crimson walls rising up around us, representing the inside of a blood vessel. Reddish-brown doughnut-shaped blood cells floated past, followed by spiky orbs. The blood vessel's wall opened up, exposing pulsing white streaks on a blue background, depicting neurons in a brain.

La Frontera works with pharmaceutical companies to "show how a drug works in the body at a cellular level," Ortiz said. In this case, it was a medicine to treat multiple sclerosis, which attacks brain neurons.

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