

TechTalk

The metaverse – bridging the chasm between promise and reality

Beyond infrastructure, legal frameworks are needed to fully realise VR space's potential



Lim Sun Sun

For The Straits Times

If users' personal records, rights and entitlements are to be recognised in the metaverse as they are in the real world, should the legal frameworks of the real world not be replicated in the metaverse too? In fact, legal scholars are already arguing for liability to be imposed on people should their avatars commit certain harms in the metaverse such as fraud and identity theft. This would necessitate tracking the real-life identities of avatars through some form of identity register.

If I had to put my money on the most overhyped tech trend of 2022, it would probably be the metaverse.

Grandiose headlines about the massive potential of the metaverse have stoked considerable scepticism, fanned by the apparent chasm between promise and reality.

Fans of the next revolution in virtual reality (VR) enthuse about the metaverse's seemingly limitless possibilities. Rapid advances in haptic and olfactory technology will enable users to not just see and hear VR stimuli, but also feel, touch and smell them. But the full realisation of this vision requires a demanding combination of hardware, software and computational power.

To that end, the metaverse is indeed some distance from becoming a ubiquitous household technology. But stripped to its

core value proposition, a VR world where we have the freedom to explore new environments and experiment with different identities, while meeting people from otherwise inaccessible communities, can present vast and intriguing prospects.

As abstract as the metaverse seems, readers old enough to remember the purely text-based multi-user dungeons (MUDs) – games such as *The Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy* – will be delighted to know that they have some experience with the metaverse because those are considered proto-metaverses.

These precursors to the immersive and interactive metaverse of today illuminate the fundamental joys of VR environments. As primitive as MUDs were, they allowed us to enter wondrous realms with mind-bending scenarios that let our imagination take flight.

Importantly, too, they enabled us to be someone we were not and to interact with people from far-flung corners of the globe.

These are the very same joys that Internet users still experience today, albeit with greater interactivity and multimedia richness.

In the HBO show *We Met In Virtual Reality*, online groupings of people with myriad interests rave about the freedom and consummate bliss they experience on the platform VRChat. Many are effusive about bonding over their love for exotic

dancing, sign-language learning or road trips.

Indeed, the platform bills itself as offering "an endless collection of social VR experiences by giving the power of creation to its community". The two critical words there are "social" and "community". Some VRChat users also speak emphatically about using VR to connect with others and find support networks and move beyond their personal traumas of social anxiety, family loss and substance dependency. Through their virtual guises, they are able to recover from setbacks, rediscover themselves and reinvent their identities.

Therein lies the promise of VR and the metaverse. When we are liberated from the corporeal trappings of the bodies we are born with, the social identities society ascribes to us, and the cultural associations we cannot divorce them from, we can mould our virtual selves into *Me 2.0*. In a digitalising world where our offline lives can have online extensions, this prospect can be edifying for many.

Indeed, considerable research has found that people with disabilities benefit from VR environments by undertaking activities they cannot otherwise engage in due to real-world physical limitations, and can do so in relative safety. In the same vein, people with hidden disabilities have availed themselves of the online world's visual anonymity to open up about their difficulties and reach



Designers of an Egyptian virtual city touring it using virtual reality gear. Stripped to its core value proposition, a VR world where one has the freedom to explore new environments and experiment with different identities while meeting people from otherwise inaccessible communities can present vast and intriguing prospects, says the writer. PHOTO: REUTERS

out to others in similar situations without the angst of public scrutiny.

Anonymity in VR is clearly not without its downsides, with a wide spectrum of bad actors exploiting anonymity for scamming, trolling and harassment, among other grievous harms. Even at its current state of market penetration, the metaverse has already witnessed notorious instances of hapless users being groped and targeted with sexual attacks, hate speech and discrimination. The acts may have been committed virtually, but can exact real trauma on victims who may be ill prepared

for the "lawlessness" of the metaverse. Such incidents have, of course, raised important questions around trust and safety features in the different metaverse worlds already in existence.

But going beyond mere trust and safety, the conversation around online harms in the metaverse has even more gravity when we consider certain aspirations around it. Mr Matthew Ball, author of the authoritative book, *The Metaverse And How It Will Revolutionise Everything*, argues that the metaverse should make it so that wherever users go and "whatever they choose to do, their achievements, history and

even finances are recognised across multitudes of virtual worlds, as well as even the real one".

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In the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, the growing adoption of digital identity verification and health records provides a glimpse into how verification of individual identities in the metaverse could work. In Singapore, platforms such as Caroussel and a slew of digital government services already leverage Singapore's national digital identification system, Singpass, for identity authentication. But such centralised repositories would be anathema to metaverse proponents, who are strong advocates of decentralisation.

However futuristic the metaverse may appear, it remains firmly grounded in the practical

realities we already face today. If indeed the metaverse is to become the much-vaunted extension of our offline lives, while offering all the benefits of a VR world, we will need to develop not just digital infrastructure but legal frameworks too.

Only then can the full vision of the metaverse be completely realised.

Lim Sun Sun is vice-president, partnerships and engagement, and professor of communication and technology at Singapore Management University. She is also the author of *Transcendent Parenting: Raising Children In The Digital Age* (2020).