

Education, population, poverty, tax...getting views on topics like those in Jersey isn't the difficult part – but have you ever noticed how many people sound eminently credible when talking about them, even though they may actually be basing their views on conjecture, false facts and blind guesswork?

There is a real danger in making the 'facts' fit the opinion, rather than the other way around – which is exactly the point at which someone with an eye on the latest buzzwords will smugly insert the phrase 'post-truth' into the conversation, imagining its actually helpful.

So, we've asked the Jersey Policy Forum to add some robust material to those crucial local debates – the point is not to provoke agreement or acquiescence; it is to provide reliable material on which others can build their views.

By Gailina Liew, Executive Director, Jersey Policy Forum

The metaverse you and your avatars

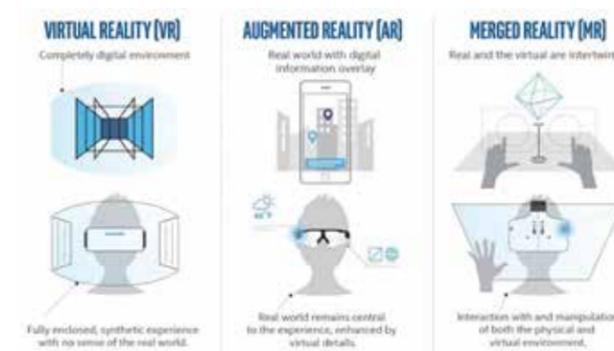
THINK-TANK

The rebranding of Facebook came with an announcement of a USD10 billion investment in Reality Labs, its metaverse division. That sounds like a huge investment – still just a fraction of Meta's annual revenue, estimated to be around USD150 billion next year – but Zuckerberg believes that a fully mature metaverse will be central to our lives in the future, and is prepared to invest in its development. He is not alone in his assessment. Microsoft has also announced its intention to extend its Teams platform into the metaverse with avatars exchanging PowerPoints and Excel files. Many other companies are already players in the space. So, what exactly is the metaverse, and why does it matter?

The concept of a metaverse is not new and the term itself was coined by a science fiction author, Neal Stephenson, in his 1992 book Snow Crash. Many science fiction fans, gamers and technologists, including leading figures in Silicon Valley, already think of the metaverse as the successor to the internet – a digital space where people have three-dimensional (3D) digital representations of themselves called avatars, that can interact with other people, who are not sharing the same physical space, through their avatars. A whole bunch of different technologies are used (think artificial intelligence, 3D reconstruction, digital humans, internet of things (IoT) moving to internet of everything (IoE), etc.) to create the digital worlds where the avatars interact. The user

Up until a few months ago, the term 'metaverse' was largely unknown to most people. Despite the intense negative media attention that Facebook – now renamed 'Meta' – has been facing recently, in time we may look back and actually thank Mark Zuckerberg for bringing the idea of the metaverse into more mainstream public discourse and policy-making arenas.

experience is described as being immersive with different degrees of being linked to what is happening in the user's physical world. Virtual reality (VR) is a totally synthetic (i.e., not linked to physical reality) experience, augmented reality (AR) uses a digital overlay on the user's physical world, and merged reality (MR) allows the user to manipulate both digital and physical worlds.



For many, all of this sounds a bit fantastical and movies like Avatar, The Matrix, Inception and the Star Trek: Next Generation holodeck come to mind. But many examples of a nascent metaverse and the broad variety of applications to enhance human experiences already exist (think Neuralink, digital twins - Digital Jersey already has one up and running for Jersey, Second Life, Roblox, Fortnite, Snapchat filters, etc.). According to a recent report published by Allied Market Research, the augmented and virtual reality market was valued at \$14.84 billion in 2020, and is projected to reach \$454.73 billion by 2030, registering a CAGR of 40.7%. What is driving this activity?

The AWE community is an industry group committed to pursuing the goal of a 1 trillion dollar XR industry by 2030 while ensuring the outcome is a world worth living in. At almost every AWE conference, Ori Inbar, CEO of Super Ventures, has mentioned the AR Cloud:

"AR researchers and industry insiders have long envisioned that at some point in the future, the real-time 3D (or Spatial) map of the world, the AR Cloud, will be the single most important software infrastructure in computing, far more valuable than Facebook's Social Graph or Google's page rank index."

For most of us, it is the new applications that will garner interest. Some exciting health applications have already emerged such as VR games to treat conditions like brain fog, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

In June 2020, a VR game called EndeavorRX by Akili Interactive became the first ever prescription-strength video game approved by the FDA to treat ADHD in children.

The company Rey is using VR to treat social anxiety. Studies from Oxford University found that patients who used automated VR therapy experienced a 38% decrease in anxiety and avoidant symptoms over a six-week period.

Dr. Brennan Spiegel of Cedars-Sinai Medical Center has studied the use of VR to manage pain for hospitalized patients:

"Virtual reality is a mind-body treatment that is based in real science. It does more than just distract the mind from pain, but also helps

to block pain signals from reaching the brain, offering a drug-free supplement to traditional pain management."

Therapeutic VR is being used for burn victims at the University of Washington, pediatric patients at Children's Hospital Los Angeles, and women in labor at Cedars-Sinai.

Companies are also jumping on board through marketing initiatives.

In October, Chipotle Mexican Grill offered free burritos to customers who visited the restaurant virtually on Roblox – a popular online gaming platform. Over four days, the first 30,000 Roblox users who visited the virtual Chipotle restaurant in a Halloween-themed costume received a code for a free burrito.

In March, Gucci released branded virtual trainers, allowing users to wear them on social media only.

For you and your avatars, the metaverse is a new and infinite playground that holds the promise of many benefits but also of harm. Just as we are seeing a move towards decentralisation in areas such as healthcare, transport and finance, it will be important to think about the implications of the metaverse in terms of decentralising our personal and collective identities and experiences. How do we ensure privacy and safety? How do we manage the actual physical impact of harm that is inflicted or suffered in the digital world? How do we protect against addiction or a complete dissociation from physical reality?



At the AWE 2021 Asia conference, Alvin Wang Graylin, President of HTC China, shared what he regards as the six laws of the metaverse.

- **There is only one metaverse.**
- **No person/company owns the metaverse.**
- **The metaverse is open and for everyone.**
- **The metaverse is device-independent.**
- **All users will have agency, and they can impact the metaverse.**
- **The metaverse is the next evolution of the internet.**

How would you ensure that people are safe and can benefit from their ventures into this new world? Something to ponder as we enter the holiday season where you may even find gifts related to the metaverse under your tree!