Chapter 16
Metaverse:
The Ethical Dilemma

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ABSTRACT

Metaverse combines the virtual and physical, synthesizing the internet, the web, and extended reality into a world where digital and physical elements blend in differing degrees. The core purpose of the metaverse is social connection. This consists of users coexisting in an ecosystem that includes cultures, laws, economies, societies, and related obligations. Therefore, it will demand standards of how humans should behave and what is considered right and wrong. Ethics is based on these standards within any given universe. The ethical challenges faced in developing and deploying a metaverse are explored, and ethical design considerations of metaverse environments are defined. The metaverse ecosystem is described and critical technologies that support it are included. Examples of current metaverses are provided so that the reader can explore and experience a metaverse and further assess the ethics and benefits.

INTRODUCTION

Metaverse combines the virtual and physical, consolidating the web and internet with Extended Reality (Lee et al., 2021; Milgram et al., 1995). Extended Reality exists on a continuum where digital and physical blend to varying degrees (Milgram et al., 1995). According to Parisi (2021), the metaverse offers a 3D space for the convergence of 3D characters and digital information. The connection between the physical and virtual selves is their shared data (Lee et al., 2021). Social connection is the primary purpose of the metaverse. The first element of the metaverse is users expressing themselves through digital avatars to live a life representing a metaphor for their real world (Lee et al., 2021). The second element of the metaverse is the creation of ecosystems that encompass culture, laws, financial economies, and societal norms. Within the virtual ecosystems, products and intangible content can be produced, shared, bought, and sold across virtual domains (Vijoen, 2020). The metaverse is uncontrolled, governed only as needed for the greater good of the largest number (Parisi, 2021).

Modern technologies, over and above the existing internet, social media, and gaming environments, are required. Augmented and virtual reality, edge computing, blockchain, and artificial intelligence will be necessary constructs for the metaverse. With these technologies, the metaverse will offer a three-dimensional virtual space that is shared, persistent, and synchronous, coming together into a perceived virtual world (Lee et al., 2021). Metaverse makes possible for one human to have multiple digital existences simultaneously but never have to be physically present (Dow, 2022). Grider and Maximo (2021) place the metaverse into internet development: 1) Web 1.0 - Netscape succeeded in connecting people online, 2) Web 2.0 - social media like Facebook progressed to connecting people within virtual communities, and 3) Web 3.0 – metaverse connects people within a virtual community-owned space. The metaverse adds dimensions of virtual economics, organizational networks, blockchain infrastructure, and decentralized control (Grider & Maximo, 2021). The internet, through metaverse, offers 3 dimensional information and experience with real-time communication in 3 dimensional spaces (Parisi, 2021).

Hyperreality frames metaverse environments. Hyperreal means to display extraordinary vividness and incredible realism in terms of detail (Merriam Webster, n.d.).But at a more theoretical and philosophical level, as perceived in a metaverse, hyperreality is best described by Baudrillard (1994). In a metaverse, the users (citizens) create the world they live in – and no prior world existed before the one they made. Baudrillard (1994) describes this as "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality; a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory" (p. 1). For Baudrillard (1994), hyperreality lies beyond what is already known to be real.

In addition to hyperreal media is synthetic media which is entirely generated through artificial intelligence. Using artificial intelligence, very real-looking images of synthetic people can be easily generated. Artificial intelligence can be used to create synthetic video that are ultra-realistic and sometimes not easily recognized as not being real (Graham, 2022). Avatars may no longer be cartoonish-looking characters but images of synthetically generated people that are not easily distinguished from real people. Likewise, environments, while not being environments that exist in the real-world, may appear to have realistic objects that are not discernible from real-world objects.

The metaverse, comprised of users coexisting in an ecosystem which includes cultures, laws, economies, societies, and related obligations, will demand standards of how humans should behave and of what is considered right and wrong. Ethics is based on these standards within any given universe (Velasquez et al., 2010). Ethical standards exist outside of prescribed laws, religions, feelings, and what is socially acceptable. Ethics define what humans should do in terms of their rights, their obligations, what most benefits society, fairness, and particular virtues that are respected by a community (Velasquez et al, 2010). Challenges to future metaverse development include privacy, governance, and ethics. The questions arise as to how user behavior will be controlled in the metaverse, and what policies will emerge for user and platform governance (Fernandez et al., 2022). The important question is, what will the ethics of metaverse be and what are the dilemmas to determining those ethics?

This article explores the ethical challenges faced in developing and deploying a metaverse and discusses metaverse governance and defines ethical design considerations of metaverse environments. The metaverse ecosystem is described and critical technologies that support a metaverse are discussed. Examples of current metaverses are provided so that the reader can explore and experience a metaverse.

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