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The Metaverse is a human rights dilemma

You can be anything you want in The Metaverse, you just can't be in control.

By Tiernan Ray | November 28, 2021 | Topic: Internet of Things

In the seventy-three years since the United Nations ratified the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights), the world has been unable to agree on what rights, exactly, should be accorded to human beings.

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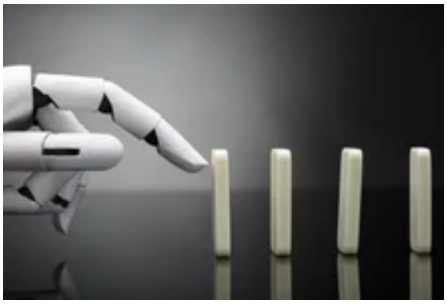

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The very idea itself is controversial. The best that can be said of such idealistic documents is that they limit the most extreme abuses to which people may subject one another, including the enslavement and economic exploitation.

That's an important achievement because the impending arrival of virtual worlds threatens to compromise human autonomy in the most basic sense.

In a Metaverse, as conceived by Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg, you cannot even scratch your virtual nose without the permission of a program-controlled completely by the company. There is no standard for virtual worlds. Every single one of them is crafted as a set of technologies known only to the proprietor.

To the extent that moving virtual limbs and seeing with virtual eyes is the equivalent of freedom of movement in a virtual world, no one who enters into a Metaverse of any kind has any autonomy. Their every move is at the discretion of the digital controls of corporations such as Meta that reserve the right to refuse freedom of movement to anyone.

It seems silly to fret over such a situation, given that the Metaverse doesn't yet exist. At the moment, it is a figment of Zuckerberg's imagination. And there is reason to believe it is all vaporware that will fail to materialize (https://www.thetechnologyletter.com/).

See also: Why I will never use Zuckerberg's metaverse (https://www.zdnet.com/article/why-i-will-never-use-zuckerbergs-metaverse/) | Facebook: Here comes the AI of the Metaverse (https://www.zdnet.com/article/facebook-here-comes-the-ai-of-the-metaverse/) | When the metaverse comes, there are few good options on who will control it (https://www.zdnet.com/article/when-the-metaverse-comes-there-are-few-good-options-on-who-will-control-it/).

Nevertheless, the thirst to participate in a future Metaverse -- every press release these days envisions amazing economic opportunities -- suggests that many social activities could become sucked into virtual worlds in whole or in part. When that happens, people either participate or are disenfranchised. The time to start thinking about the ethical issues of The Metaverse is now.

Already there is every indication that Zuckerberg and other meta-world creators will seek to trivialize autonomy by proffering consumer choice as an alternative.

The pitch for The Metaverse by Zuckerberg is that you can be whatever you want, with creators offering different wardrobes and such. But choosing a particular hue of skin color, like choosing which emoji one wants, is not control. And it is not autonomy.

Every identity in a virtual world is the creation of a private database. The individual human being has no control over that database. They can pick from a menu, and in Zuckerberg's world, perhaps they will even be able to propose what goes onto the menu. But at the end of the day, people have no veto power. What the corporation decides is final.

In other words, you can be anything you want in The Metaverse, you just can't be in control.

Imagine if your entire existence, and what you think of as your identity, were cancelable by a corporation. There's a term for that. It's called being a slave.

On a broader level, Meta's properties, Facebook and Instagram and WhatsApp don't connect to the rest of the Internet. To exist in any of those spaces is the equivalent of existing only when browsing in a store. You leave the FBR store; you cease to exist.

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Tiernan Ray for ZDNet.

People don't really exist in social media, and they will not exist in a Metaverse. Their identities are the figment of a database (https://www.zdnet.com/article/why-is-your-identity-trapped-inside-a-social-network/). People type things into a Web form, and they have the illusion that they have an identity. With no control and no autonomy, they have no identity in any meaningful sense. They are merely pawns of the database owner.

Similarly, any action in The Metaverse will be an illusion of autonomy and bodily integrity. The corporation that owns the database still controls the virtual air one breathes in a Metaverse.

The good news is, there is a solution to all of that, an approach that will promote individual autonomy and form the basis of human rights and civil rights. The answer is to extend the unfinished work of the Internet.

The Internet is based on protocols defined in specifications implemented as open source. Every computer in the world obeys such protocols in order to participate in the Internet.

The one omission of the creators of the internet is the omission of a personal protocol to allow people to control what constitutes their digital identity. A personal protocol would allow a person to have total control of their utterances in text and other forms and how they are used, including how their utterances and their digital likeness is sorted and sifted.

Anything purporting to use those utterances and likenesses such as a Metaverse would have to obey rules about how they do so. Autonomy would be first and foremost, and the commercial and other interests of enterprises would be secondary to that autonomy.

Societies around the world need to continue the unfinished business of the Internet and institute personal protocols in order to assure human and civil rights.

It is not hyperbolic to say that social media's ambition in the Metaverse is to replace the open Internet. Zuckerberg's claim, now repeated several times, is that The Metaverse will "be the successor to the mobile Internet" and "the next version of the Internet."

If a commercial entity wants to replace the open protocols of the Internet, then the world must not only reassert those protocols but take them farther by bringing them to the realm of human digital autonomy.

In his self-serving video introducing The Metaverse (https://www.facebook.com/RealityLabs/videos/561535698440683/), Zuckerberg chided naysayers as being too timid to imagine the future. The reality is that most people don't want Zuckerberg deciding their future for them.

If activity is going to take place in virtual worlds, it's time for society to push back on commercial interests by asserting human autonomy in a way that protects it from the most

predatory interests.

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