

# Zuckerverse: why we should vote with our feet and stay away from Facebook

*Facebook's rebrand to 'Meta' is an attempt to draw eyes away from the trail of scandal left in its wake. The company has a lot of explaining to do. Until then, **Sid Mohasseb** advises users to stay away from the platform. He says there's no reason to expect that the company's business model will change: 97% of its revenue comes from advertising, and it may get worse if Meta owns a piece of every product created in their metaverse.*

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The CEO of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, might have some new clothes on, but he's still the same old emperor. In a move that we should not allow to divert our attention away from the company's serious and systemic failings, Zuckerberg has dangled his latest product in our faces. Before we go anywhere near Facebook's 'metaverse' (which is essentially a rebrand of AR headsets and Second Life immersive worlds), we must not forget that Zuckerberg has some serious questions to answer. Before he does that, as advertisers and users, we should vote with our feet and stay away from what sounds like a digital dystopia.

Ex-Facebook employee Frances Haugen's leak of the 'Facebook papers' revealed how the company systematically put profits before people. That is why Zuckerberg's consequent announcement of Facebook's rebrand to 'Meta' is no accident. Whilst his metaverse (or perhaps 'Zuckerverse') has received its fair dose of ridicule, he figures that by focusing attention on his latest product offerings, he can draw our eyes away from the trail of scandal left in Facebook's wake.

A dazzling global card trick that worked. Frances Haugen's warnings are now yesterday's news, whilst the Metaverse has become everyone's favourite punchline. For Zuckerberg, all that matters is that his ex-employee is relegated to the footnotes of a previous 24-hour news cycle. Facebook's rebrand to 'Meta' is their way of establishing themselves as the leader, or even pioneer, of this field. By doing so, Facebook is sure to boost its stock price (on the first day the stock rose by 1.5%), please its investors, and assert its dominance in what may be the future of the internet.

But Facebook is late to the party it is claiming to be hosting. One of the earliest Metaverses, named Second Life, was developed by Philip Rosedale and Linden Lab in 2003. Another metaverse contender, Roblox, established in 2004, added 50 million users to its network during the pandemic. Microsoft and Sony are both front runners too; they're pouring eye-watering amounts of money into research and development. The metaverse is an increasingly crowded space, and certainly not one that is owned by Facebook, despite what its leadership wants you to think.

The 'metaverse' is a term coined by Neal Stephenson in his seminal sci-fi novel 'Snow Crash' in 1992. In his novel, users use digital avatars, who wear digital clothes, to explore digital worlds from the safety of a headset. His imagination is an uncanny prediction of what Facebook is proposing today.

There is a reason so many tech behemoths are placing their bets in this race. Such immersive augmented reality worlds will, in theory, enable surgeons, plumbers, or architects to perfect their discipline without the heavy consequence of failure. Students may be able to stroll through ancient cities or analyse a fully annotated night's sky. It may even help us predict the efficacy of certain medicines on our DNA.

Yet these are not Facebook's designs. Facebook's name may have changed, but its business model remains the same. Facebook makes 97% of its revenue from advertising, and there's no reason to expect that to change in the metaverse. In fact, it may get worse, if Meta owns a piece of every product created in their metaverse.

Neal Stephenson's original conception of a 'metaverse' was as a means to distract inhabitants of the dystopian reality of the real world. The fact that the timing of Facebook's announcement came alongside COP26 illustrates the brutal accuracy of Stephenson's prediction. Stephenson describes a sub-culture of people who opt to remain permanently connected to the 'metaverse', who are referred to as 'gargoyles' due to their disgusting appearance.

Today, the average daily social media usage is 145 minutes. A metaverse that preys on short attention spans and an insatiable desire for entertainment may well create a whole new generation of real-life 'gargoyles', wasting away behind a pair of electro-goggles. Whilst this may benefit Facebook and its shareholders, for the rest of us, this spells digital hell.

The sprawling 'metaverse' may come with its benefits, but not when Zuckerberg is its overlord. He needs to explain why Facebook has systematically failed to keep its users safe. He must explain how, and when, we will be compensated for our data. He must explain how Facebook will not copy-and-paste its old failings into this new digital platform.

Until then, we as users would be sensible to stay away. Facebook, a company with revenue higher than many country's GDPs, is not a democratic organisation. But we are not powerless; using the platform is a choice. Before using it, we must ask what Zuckerberg's vision is. If it's just escapism on steroids, I suggest we stay away before we too become gargoyles glued to our masks.

In 2004, a boyish Zuckerberg appeared on CNBC, and told reporters that 'The Facebook' was "an online directory that connects people". Little did he know that his platform would be used to sow misinformation, topple governments, and ultimately divide people. Today, nobody knows how the metaverse will turn out, but we can't let Zuckerberg decide.

In the spirit of "dog eat dog" capitalism and a profit-first mindset, Zuckerberg has created a company worth close to a trillion dollars and is continuing with his self-centred priorities as he is creating the "Zuckerverse." In a decade or two should we blame him for his greed and savviness or should we blame ourselves for our lack of caring today? To avoid being victims, gargoyles, we must act now. I hate to say I told you so when the new generation of whistleblowers show up!



#### Notes:

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