

Understanding kids in the metaverse

By Sonia Livingstone and Kruakae Pothong

The “metaverse” represents the next generation internet, promising richer, more immersive 3D experience and more seamless conversion of physical and digital realities. However, the convergence of physical and digital realities is as daunting as it is exciting for children’s safety, development and wellbeing, since the digital world has not been built with children in mind. We are still playing catch-up with the problems that today’s digital world generates, making children’s present digital experience often risky by design.

The Children’s Media Conference 2022, held live at Sheffield’s Crucible Theatre in July, held a plenary panel on the metaverse. We were glad to join this in discussion with one of our commissioners, Anna Rafferty, VP Digital Consumer Engagement at the LEGO Group and David Kleeman, SVP Global Trends at Dubit, whose writing on the metaverse is widely read. Chaired by Gary Pope, CEO of Kids Industries, we asked whether the metaverse is more than an empty signifier or a marketing strategy by Meta and, even, whether the metaverse is already here. After all, children live in a creative universe of possibilities that spans virtual and physical environments, and the stories they live by are bounded only by their imaginations.

Watch the panel on “Understanding Kids in the Metaverse” on YouTube here.



The panel on “Understanding Kids in the Metaverse”

What could possibly go wrong, the panel was asked? The risks of the metaverse for children are already very salient, with media coverage calling out its culture of sexual violence and racist abuse. This is partly because “adult players rarely consider the ethical and legal boundaries of socialising in these online worlds” and partly because regulators have barely begun to address the emerging challenges. But it is also because the businesses designing the metaverse have not sufficiently anticipated the safety risks, nor the privacy, security or commercial risks.

At the Digital Futures Commission, we believe that building 'by design' solutions into the very fabric of the metaverse, in anticipation of its potential uses and users, is both wise and necessary. This will shape the behaviour of adult players, ease the task of regulators and, of course, it will benefit children. Will companies see it as in their interest to join this effort?

Whatever the metaverse is and whatever it becomes will depend crucially on today's struggles to shape it. Must this be a struggle between children's interests versus commercial interests, or is it feasible to square the circle and serve both? With many companies poised to invest heavily in children's digital opportunities to play, learn and connect under the banner of "the metaverse", this is a critical moment to set out clearly what good looks like for children in a digital world.

The Digital Futures Commission (5Rights) has developed and tested Playful by Design as a proactive rather than reactive cure for today's digital ills. We were inspired, first, by the realisation that hygiene factors such as safety and privacy, while vital, are insufficient for a positively rights-enhancing world for children. And second, by the wealth of ideas about play developed through our human history of inventiveness and creativity, long preceding the advent of digital technologies. These, we propose, can be harnessed also in digital environments to enhance children's digital play opportunities.

Specifically, our Playful by Design principles prescribe a reduction of compulsive and privacy-invasive digital features along with crucial enabling features to ensure that children's immersive play is intrinsically motivated and voluntary, enhances children's imagination, and offers inclusivity, diversity and agency. Last but not least, Playful by Design requires digital innovators and product developers to recognise children's evolving capacities by making their products and services age-appropriate and safe. These are the principles that the metaverse should be built on, reflecting children's voices, so that the next generation internet respects children's rights rather than exploits their vulnerabilities through dark patterns, commercial profiling or abuses of persuasive design.

Note

We have published on Playful by Design in The Children's Media Yearbook 2022, along with reflections on youth mental health and tech regulation in anticipation of the metaverse.

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