When Will The Metaverse Be Here?

While Mark Zuckerberg's keynote at Connect would have you believe that the metaverse is almost at the gates, the reality is slightly more complex. The reality is that the metaverse is both several years away, and also here, available for your use. Depending on how you define the metaverse, the metaverse can be a futuristic notion requiring massive advancements in technology. Or, it could be a theoretical idea that is manifested differently by different online services and companies.

To understand the precise dateline for the "launch of the metaverse" as it were, let us first unpack the meaning of the concept.

What Is the Metaverse?

The metaverse is defined as a unified virtual space where users can perform interactions with virtual objects and with each other by using the self-sustaining elements of the surrounding virtual world. There can only be one metaverse, which unites all of the virtual worlds built by developers, VR companies, and social media giants like Meta.

Also, the metaverse will have its own economy and will support a digital life almost as rich as our real-world one. If this last bit sounds familiar, that's because the metaverse is closely related to social media in several aspects. Both offer highly immersive online experiences. You can make purchases, meet people, learn new things, work, and make money without having to exit to the physical world. It's for this reason that commentators have noted that we already live in Facebook's Metaverse – which is the company's conglomeration of social apps. Going by this definition, the metaverse already exists and only requires an AR/VR overlay without changing any of the foundational modalities.

Mark Zuckerberg's vision for the metaverse is also a social one. Here's how he explains the term in his Founder's Letter:

"When I started Facebook, we mostly typed text on websites. When we got phones with cameras, the internet became more visual and mobile. As connections got faster, video became a richer way to share experiences. We've gone from desktop to web to mobile; from text to photos to video. But this isn't the end of the line. The next platform will be even more immersive — an embodied internet where you're in the experience, not just looking at it. We call this the metaverse."

This begs another question: if the metaverse is an embodied internet, is our current internet, then, metaverse 1.0?

Is the Internet Technically a Metaverse?

You could see why this argument makes sense. Mark Zuckerberg describes the metaverse as an interconnected digital space where you can have new experiences through avatars, independent of your real-world surroundings. The true value of the metaverse is that it helps you forge and strengthen meaningful connections; the immersiveness of AR/VR is only a bonus add-on.

Keeping this core value proposition in mind, one could call Web 2.0 an early version of the metaverse – lacking its three-dimensional characteristics, but similar in terms of interoperability, forms of access and transaction, and with similar privacy and regulatory issues.

If that were the case, then the answer to your question "when will the metaverse be here?" is that it's already arrived.

4 Metaverses That Already Exist

Now, let us look at the AR/VR-enabled metaverse first coined by Neal Stephenson in Snow Crash. This is essentially what Zuckerberg referred to at Connect, an all-encompassing 3D VR world that relies on blockchain for decentralization. Interestingly, even this isn't an incredibly futuristic concept. There are four companies that are currently developing a workable metaverse and making impressive progress:

1. Decentraland

Decentraland is a 2017 startup that has its own fully functional metaverse, complete with a cryptocurrency called MANA. Decentraland has rapidly gained momentum in the last couple of years. It is now used to host notable events like a recent Sotheby's-like auction for art by Banksy. It even has the world's first metaverse embassy, where the Government of Barbados is a part. Decentraland is possibly the closest we have come to the exact vision of the metaverse as described by Mark Zuckerberg.

2. Microsoft Mesh for Teams

Microsoft Mesh is like a metaverse for work, where people can collaborate using VR avatars, mixed reality, and sophisticated 3D AR modelling. Mesh is accessible through any VR headset as well as on desktop, mobile, and tablet apps. Its use cases are currently limited and you can try out Mesh only for Teams, the Mesh app for Hololens, and Altspace VR – with more apps and VR spaces slated for the future. This metaverse, too, is now available for users.

3. Sandbox

Like Decentraland, Sandbox also provides a complete metaverse experience, but it is squarely focused on gaming. Players can not only build and own real estate and assets, but they can also monetise the virtual experiences they create. Sandbox has its own art editing app, a game-maker, and a marketplace to sell and invest in assets. For all intents and purposes, Sandbox is a metaverse that you can start using today by signing up for an account in exchange for NFTs.

4. Second Life and Minecraft

Finally, Second Life is probably the oldest application in the market to anticipate the metaverse. The app doesn't call itself the metaverse, but behaves exactly like one, only without the AR/VR overlay. Users can create a virtual avatar, engage in social experiences, move around in virtual locations, attend events, and much more. In fact, Second Life was never really a game – it was a 3D online alternative to the real world from the very beginning. In the same vein, Minecraft is another world-building app that works in both desktop/mobile and VR formats.

When Will Facebook Launch its Metaverse?

Facebook's metaverse is likely to be much more sophisticated, closer to the seamlessness and intuitiveness of science fiction. By his own admission, Zuckerberg notes that the metaverse could take several years to build. However, you can expect a soft launch of sorts within the next five years, as, by 2031, Zuckerberg hopes to sign on a billion users to its metaverse platform.