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The metaverse has quickly captured the world's imagination. The idea of an immersive world in which people interact with each other and businesses through avatars has been around for many years. But the rapid rise of digital currencies and nonfungible tokens has accelerated the conversation in recent months. It's one of the hottest stories in Big Tech, and the metaverse is creating business value for companies such as Roblox that are building its many components. At the same time, the metaverse has created concern.

A recently published Business Insider article asks whether the metaverse might create virtual echo chambers and tailored realities – possibly fracturing reality as we know it and making society more polarized. The article (which quotes me) must have hit a nerve. It was picked up in outlets such as MSN, Virtual Reality Insider, and Yahoo Finance. These concerns bear closer examination.

As a technologist, I am excited about the metaverse. As a member of our society, I am also a bit concerned about the potential harm that the metaverse could cause. I believe it's crucial that the

technology companies designing the metaverse take a mindful approach with human centricity, responsibility, and trustworthiness at the core.

Altered Reality

The metaverse may alter our sense of reality significantly. The metaverse changes how people engage with intelligent digital systems, from being spectators to acting as first-person, ego-centric participants.

Businesses are already achieving value from the metaverse, such as the use of digital twins to perform highly complex tasks in virtual worlds. But the increased hype also puts societal risks in a clearer light. There is enough evidence of the detrimental effects of social media and its role as a catalyst in the ever-widening polarization of the global societies. Conspiracy theories and false information that used to be on the fringe have now taken the center-stage.

The metaverse may very well amplify these problems dramatically. Fuzzy trace theory helps us understand why. Fuzzy trace theory posits that humans have a preference to reason with fuzzy traces of memory of past events versus verbatim detailed factual. This helps us understand how false information created in fuzzy echo chambers can get embedded in our psyche and take hold as facts. Now consider how the metaverse can create completely immersive echo chambers that block out our analog world. In the metaverse, data for every micro expression is captured, analyzed, modeled, and embedded back to further drive actions that benefit the platform creators. A metaverse built on top of these foundations is likely to worsen the global crisis of empathy with economic benefits going to the commercial and geo-political entities that monetize polarization.

Potential Solutions

I believe governments must establish regulatory frameworks to ensure the responsible use of technology and to mitigate risk against societal harm. As an example of leading with responsibility, Tencent has already taken a position that they will be pragmatic in their approach and operate within the boundaries of regulatory framework. From a data privacy and individual protection perspective, this may also accelerate establishment of an Internet Bill of Rights. Data privacy regulations will be challenging to establish and enforce. As it is, they are already difficult to establish and monitor in the physical world where we have country, state, and local level regulations. Who would be the governing and enforcing entity in a borderless virtual world?

Regulations may take time to develop and be agreed upon. Meanwhile, the technology firms building the metaverse must remember that with power comes great responsibility. I see an opportunity for them to take a mindful approach to the metaverse. Being mindful means designing with human centricity, responsibility, and trustworthiness at the core. This empathy-first approach can help ensure that designers build a metaverse by focusing on the emotions that we hope to evoke through an artificially intelligent immersive experience that further augments human potential.

On our blog, we discuss mindfulness in the context of artificial intelligence (AI), as this example shows. The parallel is appropriate: like the metaverse, AI holds incredible potential for improving how we live and work, but AI is also fraught with problems such as being biased and not being inclusive enough.

In a way, I see the metaverse as the space program of our era. The quest to send humans to the moon and explore space led to many innovations that have helped society. I see that the quest to

create metaverse is very likely to catalyze innovation in data (e.g., high fidelity synthetic data), software, algorithms, AI (e.g., unsupervised translation across any languages), hardware, and digital experiences. These technologies could hasten the democratization of AI and help solve major problems like climate change, food security, health, and longevity. The benefits of these ancillary technologies may outlast the hype of the metaverse itself.

Contact Centific

Your business might be asking how to embrace the metaverse. Now is the right time to ask. We can help you do so in a mindful way. Our own FUEL methodology helps businesses design innovative products with people at the center. It's a flexible approach to creating mindful solutions to business problems. Contact us to get started.

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