

The potential for an inclusive metaverse is here – it's up to us to unlock it

Specific jargon, complex technologies, high economic barriers to entry... The metaverse is indeed far from being the most welcoming environment for newcomers. As the potential of the metaverse grows, so does the concern of an even bigger digital divide for those without the means and the skills to access it.

Last year, Bloomberg unveiled a study showing the selling price of Cryptopunks' NFT decreased when the pixelated faces showed darker skin colouring or female features. People invest in avatars that look like them, the article reads. Months before, Bloomberg still was bringing to light the fact that 77% of revenues generated by NFT art sales were going to male artists. Though the metaverse is in its infancy, already the first glimpse reveals a lack of diversity.

Indeed, the metaverse and the crypto space, more specifically, are well known for being populated by the archetype of the 'crypto bros': white men, in their 20s to 40s, tech-savvy and financially comfortable, ready to invest 'hard' and to fail fast.

Ironically, those crypto bros were the very first ones to promote blockchain and decentralisation as a way to empower communities, to 'give the power back to the people', granting them financial independence, free from big corporations, public institutions and geographical barriers. But the reality is, at this stage, those who come from a less privileged background where education, digital literacy and opportunities are not equally accessed seem to be excluded from this new virtual economy.

Yet, there is a light at the end of the tunnel. Part of the concept of the metaverse derives from another sector that has long been crippled by misogyny and exclusion: the gaming industry. While there is still a lot of work to be done to make it an inclusive space both for players and the workforce – 79% of main characters are male, 76% of the workforce too – we've seen very positive changes happening in the last few years.

Companies have been forced to clean up their act in terms of toxic workplace culture and we are seeing more representation and visibility for BIPOC, LGBTQI+ communities and people with disabilities. These winds of change are directly linked to the 'mainstreamisation' of the geek culture and the rise of female gamers – women account for almost half of the video games players nowadays.

So, will we see the same phenomenon happen in the metaverse? There's no doubt. Beyond the fact that the gaming industry and its reckoning are profoundly intertwined with the concept, the economic potential of the metaverse – the sector is expected to reach \$8T by 2030 – already attracts people from any economic background, regardless of gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation.

The blockchain game, Axie Infinity, is the perfect example of this theory. A simple smartphone, a basic crypto wallet and easy-to-understand gaming mechanism was all that was needed for Venezuelans and Filipinos to turn the game into a lifeline and make an actual living in countries where most of the population lives well below the poverty line.

This is proof that, with the right tools and practical knowledge, the metaverse could actually become a social leveller in a society racked by high levels of inflation and the constant fear of recession.

In a perfect (virtual) world, diversity and inclusion would be embedded into the very core of metaverse companies' strategies, both in organisational structure and in potential targeted audience. In reality, we are currently seeing that resourcefulness at an individual and community level is still the main catalyst for progress, just like in any other economy. So what is left for bringing diversity and inclusion to the table?

A new strategy

First-of-all, we need more educational materials and less sensational headlines. When most headlines tend to qualify users of the metaverse as investors and to primarily display the millions of dollars spent on it, where do 'normal' people stand? Probably inside surveys showing that they are afraid of the metaverse and Web3 while *not understanding clearly* what it is.

The metaverse should become part of the curriculum at schools and part of an upskilling HR strategy at work. Recently, Sorare, Ledger, The Sandbox and others partnered with the Web3 community Jericho and VC Alven and designed a program dedicated to demystifying Web3 to professionals.

Secondly, we need to find the right balance between anonymity and representation. Both can be seen as double-edged swords. Anonymity is what trolls rely on to harass and scam vulnerable people online. But anonymity could be a powerful tool when it comes to hiring through a metaverse platform.

Let's imagine going to an interview online with a non-humanoid avatar. Bias is no longer a problem, people will be judged by their real value and their skills. Last year, Microsoft used Minecraft in its hiring process to enable neurodivergent candidates to show their skills, in addition to the traditional but very restricting interview sessions. It was a success. Others should follow the example.

Allyship and community are also very important for the development of more D&I practices, as they find their roots in activism. We need more examples of projects like World of Women, myBFF or Women Rise that promote women and non-binary creators from marginalised communities, in the crypto space. Those projects rely on sorority, and usually offer both a podium to more diverse profiles and give back to the community as a whole by donating part of their revenues to charities.

Finally, it's obvious that regulations and accountability will be key to make the metaverse a safer and more inclusive place for everyone. Haven't we learned anything from the use of social media? The metaverse is not clearly defined yet, so there is still time. The World Economic Forum has officially *launched a working group* to address the topic - but we need to move collectively so that

we don't end up with the same problems as the ones that weren't tackled in the early days of the internet revolution and are still present today. We must act fast, and we must act now.

Aurore Geraud is senior researcher at *L'Atelier BNP Paribas*.

Article by AURORE GERAUD