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Game, Set, and Metaverse

Engaging Fandoms in a Virtual World

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At one of the largest tennis tournaments of 2023, some sports fans gathered to watch and engage—not in a clubhouse or around concession stands—but in a virtual world. It was a cutting-edge proof of concept that will be one of the foundations for the future of sports.

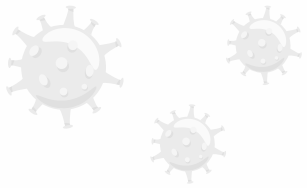
The metaverse has received healthy doses of excitement and skepticism. At its core, however, the concept of the metaverse is the ability to create a human-centered digital experience that blends the real and digital worlds. It is possible today because of the confluence of maturing technologies: connected networks of interoperable and engaging 3D environments leveraging game engines, GPUs, AI, blockchain, non-fungible tokens, the cloud, 5G, and perception technologies (e.g., computer vision, machine sensing, haptics, and lidar).

The potential of what these connected technologies can enable is greater than the sum of its parts. It can be a space for product development and prototyping, for immersive workforce training and upskilling, and also as a platform for likeminded audiences (or fandoms) to engage with one another. Such was the case at the 2023 BNP Paribas Open, where a large broadcast company and sports broadcasting network broke new ground in a virtual world.

Creating a virtual experience on the court

The COVID-19 pandemic was a harsh lesson for many enterprises. Almost overnight, businesses were challenged to transform their operations for a world marked by social distancing, working from home, and depressed demand for in-person services and commerce. It hit the sports industry particularly hard, given the crowded nature of sporting events. As such, the pandemic accelerated the digitization of sports, creating opportunities for organizations to push the limits of technology to engage fans at a time when few people could go to the game.

Sinclair Broadcast Group is one of the largest TV station operators in the United States, and among its properties is the Tennis Channel. Sinclair worked with [Deloitte's Unlimited Reality™ practice](#) and leveraged EPIC's Unreal Engine to develop a metaverse experience for tennis fandoms. Fans customized a personal avatar and watched matches while exploring the virtual arena, discovering 360 experiences, playing games, and accessing exclusive content, such as live-streamed interviews with players.





The project was in part a proof of concept. The intent was to engage and delight fans with a personalized experience. As with any business, however, new offerings require a viable business model and path back to ROI, and Sinclair's tennis metaverse was also a platform for demonstrating how a 3D virtual experience can be commercialized. It exemplified how brands could be displayed to fans and how personalized offerings for products and services could be delivered.

Sinclair's project proved out the viability of a metaverse experience using technologies as they are available today. It yielded a foundation on which the company can build and iterate, continually improving and expanding the offering. Fans enjoyed the personalized experience they seek, while partners, advertisers, and others can contemplate opportunities in a real, working metaverse, and Sinclair is positioned to meet fans where they are as 3D virtual worlds proliferate and mature.

Words of wisdom for the metaverse era

Based on Sinclair's experience, there are some clear lessons learned that innovation leaders can consider as they explore how the metaverse may be valuable in their industries. Financial obstacles are no longer the single most significant issues for building value in the metaverse. Technical feasibility of the metaverse is a priority, and with something that is changing and improving this quickly, an important strategic approach is to create a foundation of technology excellence. Building this foundation includes focusing on data modernization, risk mitigation, cybersecurity, and regulatory awareness, all of which require input from a cross-disciplinary team of business leaders. A strong foundation also rests on an ecosystem of partnerships and vendors (e.g., cloud computing, professional services, game engines, NFT wallets, etc.) who can contribute to a technology endeavor that is inherently multi-dimensional.

The business value of the metaverse is being invented and discovered today. Each industry and enterprise may take a different approach to combining technologies into something transformational. This is a grander, more powerful vision for the metaverse, one that blends the real and digital worlds and creates a fundamentally new platform for business operations and customer engagement.



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