

What makes me “me” in the metaverse

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Hi, I'm Sabrina, an alumna of the Gates Cambridge Scholarship programme. I'm leading a multidisciplinary research pod on the metaverse, in Accenture's Human Sciences Studio.

What is the metaverse? An influential venture capitalist, Matthew Ball, describes the metaverse as a sort of successor state to the mobile Internet. Experts and technologists have not agreed on a definition of the metaverse, but we know that the metaverse will host human interactions. There are three themes that persistently thread through any considerations of human interactions in the metaverse. And these three themes are identity, sociality and ethics. Today, I'm going to be speaking to you about identity in virtual worlds.

While VR (virtual reality) is an important building block of the metaverse, the Metaverse is not just about VR. Virtual worlds offer many new degrees of freedom in how the self is represented. In a “selfie generation” where image is everything and profiles are central, are we able to define ourselves beyond our physical appearance? Arguably in virtual worlds that closely mirror human relationships in the physical world— for example, a workplace – users choose a virtual representation of themselves that's closer to how they look in real life. Not all virtual worlds offer the same affordances in which we can express ourselves.

Identity researchers believe that the most important aspect of our identity is the core self which remains constant over time. The unique “I”. While there is a stable part of our identity, there is also the changing self, which may change because of our changing social connotations, or changing dispositions and our changing beliefs in general. The multiple selves could coexist, but some are more salient than others at any given time. In this case, Sabrina the Gates scholar was at some point, Sabrina the psychologist, and is now Sabrina, a Human Sciences Studio researcher in Accenture. Sabrina, who is currently a mom to a toddler, shares the same core self as Sabrina, the child who fled Indonesia in the 1998 racial riots.

But what if some features of my identity have not been expressed before, given the limitations of the physical world that we live in? Suppose the song of my life is played on an instrument that hasn't been invented yet. Indeed, the human personality is multifaceted and complex. We choose to display parts of our identity through creative expressions and social interactions. This is the core defining feature of being human.

What does it mean for my sense of self if I can be anything I like? Is this aspirational representation of my “self” less authentic than how I dress when I meet you for coffee? Or is, in fact, this embodiment of my hidden identity helping me be and feel more “me”? And, what does it mean for my interactions with other people? Whether I can be a dragon in my workplace Metaverse, remains a question for HR. But is there a way to claim unique ownership of my embodied self? Perhaps we should consider that anonymity and pseudonymity can provide a sense of psychological safety in virtual worlds. But if I'm anonymous, I can't flex that NFT ownership!

So what makes me “me” in the metaverse?