Fortnite is winning the metaverse

In 2021, Facebook's parent company got a new name and a new goal. "Over time, I hope we are seen as a metaverse company," CEO Mark Zuckerberg said at the time. He later called the metaverse "the successor to the mobile internet" and noted that the concept would be so big that it was too much for any one company to take on, spanning an entire industry.

That hasn't happened yet. Even Meta employees barely use the company's flagship metaverse app, *Horizon Worlds*, and over the last few years, Zuckerberg's definition of the metaverse seems to have shifted from a *Ready Player One*-style virtual world to one that blends the real and the virtual as new buzzwords like AI have taken root. Either way, this vision of the internet hasn't exactly established itself the way Zuckerberg planned — at least not from Meta. But the metaverse business appears to be booming in *Fortnite*.

Yesterday, Disney invested $1.5 billion in Epic Games, with the goal of creating what it describes as an "expansive and open games and entertainment universe" that's tied to *Fortnite*. This comes off of a major restructuring for *Fortnite* earlier this year in which it shifted from a popular online shooter to a set of connected experiences ranging from a Lego survival game to a *Rock Band*-style music festival. (This new era began, in true *Fortnite* fashion, with a huge virtual concert.)

Disney previously made its own efforts in the space. In 2022, the company tasked executive Mike White with leading its metaverse efforts, with former CEO Bob Chapek touting "the so-called metaverse, which I believe is the next great

storytelling frontier.” A year later, its metaverse division was eliminated as part of a wave of mass layoffs.

So what’s the difference? Why haven’t a massive entertainment conglomerate and a massive social network been able to crack the metaverse, but a goofy game where a banana can fight Ariana Grande has? The answer is that, well, it’s a goofy game. Meta and Disney (and every other company chasing the metaverse trend) started with the desire to create a new vision of the internet, an all-encompassing virtual world that could serve as a place to play and to work. But they didn’t give people a reason to want to exist in that space. *Fortnite*, on the other hand, began as a thing millions of people really wanted to do — play a fun game with characters they know and love — and built its virtual world aspirations on top of that.

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“We’re not fighting a trend,” Epic executive VP Saxs Persson told me last year. “We’re just trying to broaden something that we already see today in *Fortnite*. That’s all we’re doing really is doubling down on the things that we know are successful today.”

Fortnite’s evolution has been slow and steady since it launched. It actually began as a survival game before its battle royale mode took off. Since then, Epic has tried many things to make *Fortnite* more of a place than a game. There have been virtual concerts, millions spent on esports, art galleries, violence-free hangout zones, and more. But at the core of this has always been an ever-changing and consistently popular video game. In fact, *Fortnite*’s latest reinvention was preceded by the throwback event *Fortnite OG*, which was designed to lure back lapsed players. Without the game, the rest doesn’t work.

Of course, it hasn’t been entirely smooth sailing, even for Epic. Not all of those bets worked. Party royale is a wasteland, and the competitive side of *Fortnite* has largely become an afterthought. And like a lot of tech companies, Epic got ahead of itself after a pandemic-related boom in business. Last year, the company laid off 16 percent of its workforce, with , “We’ve been spending way more money than we earn, investing in the next evolution of Epic and growing *Fortnite* as a metaverse-inspired ecosystem for creators.”

At present, *Fortnite* doesn’t exactly match the sci-fi vision of a virtual world. Logging in to the game looks more like browsing the YouTube homepage than jacking into the matrix. But beginnings of that interconnectedness are there, with elements like your avatar and XP carrying over between experiences. If you love being Peely the banana, you can be him while racing cars or playing guitar or checking out a comedy show.

Maybe, whenever it does launch, the Disney universe will be the next step toward that more unified virtual space — one that actually looks more like the metaverse tech execs have been hyping up for so long.

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