

Feeling averse to the metaverse

Brian J. Lamoureux Guest columnist

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Pop quiz: Who said this in 2012? “We limit the amount of technology our children use at home.”

Believe it or not, Apple co-founder Steve Jobs said this to a reporter when he was asked whether his children used Apple’s new iPad. When I first read this quote, I wondered what Mr. Jobs knew about the product he created that we didn’t? How could the creator of a device push it into the global marketplace but forbid his children to use it at home?

Mr. Jobs was no outlier, either. Bill Gates implemented a limit on his daughter’s screen time when she developed an unhealthy attachment to a video game. And, many Silicon Valley tech executives send their children to Waldorf schools where screens are verboten and learning is done through mud, string, touch, pen, and paper.

Fast forward 10 years to today: Facebook recently announced that it is changing its name to Meta, which the company claims better fits its overall brand and focus, including developing the so-called “metaverse.” Devoting some 10,000 workers to this effort, Facebook promises that the metaverse will be a virtual-reality based world that will allow us to don goggles, sit around a virtual conference table with our peers, and then go to a virtual coffee shop to meet up with a virtual friend. Just when you thought we (and our children) are already spending too much time in front of screens, we now get to strap those screens to our faces, sit on a comfortable chair for hours on end, and even more effectively ignore the real humans in the next room.

No, thank you. One of the privileges of nearing 50 years old is that you have license to engage in the time-honored tradition of decrying the continued downfall of civilization. Against that backdrop, I offer the following questions for your consideration: Has your relationship with

screens or devices helped or hindered your real relationships over the last decade? Do you wish you spent more or less time in front of your screens? What's the name of your neighbor two houses down? When's the last time you went for a walk with a loved one?

Et tu, Brian? Yes, I ask those questions not to shame but because I also struggle with screen time. I will reserve full judgment about the metaverse once I see how it's developed and what safeguards are put in place. But, if history is any guide, I worry that the metaverse will be developed in a way that offends our dignity as humans, and will be another source of profit at the expense of our privacy, health, mental well-being, and relationships.

I am also concerned about the impact this virtual movement will have on our bodies and, in turn, our souls and hearts. Science has proven that human touch is critical to our well-being and establishing (and nurturing) our relationships. Perhaps Michelangelo put it best: "To touch is to give life." Indeed, researchers know that humans need the magic of presence and touch to fully identify the love, compassion, and gratitude of others. If you don't believe this, simply recall the early days of the pandemic where we deeply lamented our loss of sharing communal and family space with others at the dinner table, restaurant, or church pew.

Finally, remember that one of Facebook's initial slogans was "Move Fast and Break Things." Things sure are moving fast. What will break next?

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