Metaverse – five things you need to know

Published on 6 December 2023   Written by Emma Kelly, Futures Analysis, National Crime Agency

About the virtual world and challenges for law enforcement

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1. 'Metaverse' covers a range of technologies

There isn't a single definition for the metaverse. At its simplest it is a virtual, immersive space where users interact in real time across digital, social and gaming environments. Via a range of technologies, including virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR) and extended reality (XR), it challenges traditional concepts of reality across digital and physical worlds. While a widespread adoption of a fully immersive metaverse is unlikely in the next 10 years, 'metaverse-like' spaces are increasingly common.

2. Challenges for law enforcement

It presents challenges for law enforcement, providing a platform for virtual crime such as theft, hacking, fraud and harassment. These offences have real-world consequences, such as financial loss and emotional distress. Anonymity within the sites, enabled by the use of avatars or pseudonyms, can hinder efforts to identify and apprehend individuals involved in these illegal activities. (An avatar is an image that represents a person online and can be moved around the screen.)

3. Risks to children

The metaverse is particularly attractive to children who may be vulnerable to online dangers such as exploitation, cyberbullying and exposure to inappropriate content. Metaverse-like gaming platforms are already extremely popular with children, some with 66.1 million daily active users. It has been argued that they profit by putting children at risk of abuse and exploitation.

4. Importance of understanding technological advancements

With the growth in global activity on the metaverse, an understanding of technological advancements and appropriate methods of collecting, preserving and presenting digital evidence, both nationally and internationally, will be increasingly important at all levels of law enforcement.

5. Guidance for investigations

Europol has published a useful law enforcement-centric report on the metaverse. Force communications intelligence units and forensic departments can provide guidance on investigations in this space.

- This article has been peer reviewed by Inspector Liam Cahill, Counter Terrorism Research Lab, Metropolitan Police Service.

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