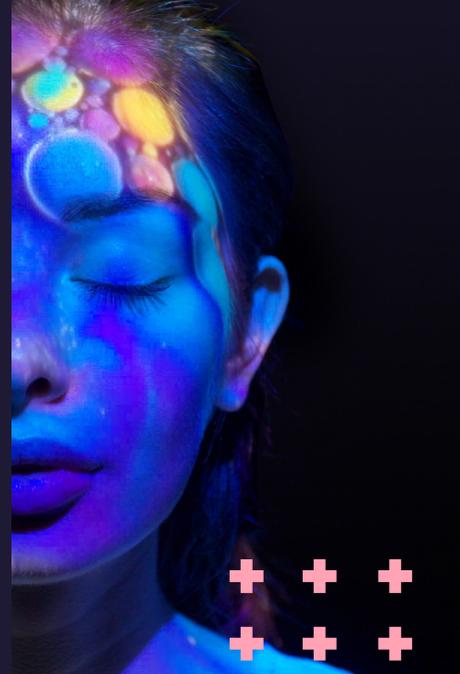


# Meta-Clusivity. Building an Inclusive Metaverse

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## Is 2022 the year of metaverse?

Judging by the sheer number of headlines, the astronomical **growth of players in gaming universes** like Roblox, the **sales of meta-hardware**, and oh yeah...**Metaverse Fashion Week**, you wouldn't be so crazy to think so.

Metaverse ecosystems are logging some serious time and investment, there's no doubt about it. But in reality, (pun very much intended) we're a long way away from Metaverse being named Time's "person" of the year.

As this technology and form of interaction becomes more pervasive, its adoption is not guaranteed to be equitable. Which brings us to our area of focus: **Representation and inclusion in the metaverse.**

## Shooting Star, or Black Hole?

In its most basic terms, the metaverse represents a world without the physical limitations of reality – in many ways, an opportunity to create an idealistic version of the real world, free from bias, sexism, and discrimination of any kind.

Today's customizable avatars, skins, and digital clothing and accessory options offer **near-limitless capability for self-expression**. You can come as you are, and be who you want to be, and it's a chance to be exposed to and form **meaningful connections with communities** that you may have never been able to access IRL. Similarly, there are **shared experiences** to be had in these environments that may be out of reach in the physical world. According to NRG's December 2021 study "**For Meta or for Worse**", **nearly half of audiences (46%)** say they intend to spend more time in the metaverse, in part because events of the past two years have bolstered appreciation for the role that online platforms can play in enabling communities to thrive.

### Good in theory, but not yet practiced.

While positive strides are being made, at the same time, issues are arising around true representation and inclusion in the metaverse. When it comes to gender fluidity, LGBTQ+ representation, and accessibility, adoption hasn't kept up with our cultural realities. There is still significant progress to be made – particularly around equitable physical entrance into digital worlds, the options for avatars, as well as representation in virtual influencers and creators.

This is clearly top of mind for many audiences. 70% of survey respondents in a 2021 report from the Institute of Digital Fashion titled "**My Self, My Avatar, My Identity: Diversity and Inclusivity within Virtual Worlds**" expressed that gender representation within virtual experiences was vital to them. 60% were "concerned about the increased potential for bullying and discrimination against disabled people within virtual worlds."

# Ask Before You Activate.

With all this in mind, every stakeholder involved in building metaverse worlds has an important stake in this game. Before diving in, brands, in particular, should be asking themselves key questions

- \_ **Why am I in the metaverse?**
- \_ **Why are my consumers there?**
- \_ **What kind of experience – whether an extension of my current physical and digital experiences OR something entirely distinct – am I offering?**

**Let's dig in a little more... looking to luminaries at our organization for guidance.**

## **Why (or if) you're there is really about answering "what's your purpose"?**

Every brand should have a purpose that guides and inspires how it interacts with the world around it, whether it's meta, IRL, or the next post-modern, post-meta form of interaction.

And in immersive spaces like the metaverse, engaging purposefully with consumers provides a unique opportunity to bring your brand to life like never before. It's a place to create and enter communities that resonate with your values, and not just another channel for driving sales.

So before engaging, ask yourself:

- \_ **What's your brand purpose and your brand promise to consumers?**
- \_ **Is that true IRL and in the metaverse?**
- \_ **Does the metaverse offer an expansion of your brand purpose?**

## **Is the brand's role authentic?**

Just because your brand logo is blue doesn't mean you should go create a blue-themed avatar. A brand's role in the metaverse doesn't always have to relate to product or purchase, but it does need to be grounded in some element of the brand experience.

For example, if your brand aims to empower self-expression via fashion, providing authentic value in the metaverse will also provide the same benefit, while uniquely translating what that looks like in the digital form.

Also, take some time for self-evaluation...Are you getting it (inclusion and representation) right in the real world first, before expanding to the metaverse?

**"As long as brands are authentic in their own efforts to celebrate diversity, their presence in the metaverse should be a natural extension of those beliefs. Brands should also ensure that their created experiences are inclusive".**

**- Kevin Tarpey,**  
SVP of Integrated Communications at Assembly



Top Photo Credit: Christian Dior x Ready Player Me  
Bottom Photo Credit: M7 Innovations; Metaverse Fashion Week



# So, What Should Brands be Doing?

## INCLUSIVE, FROM THE CORE:

**Inclusion should be organically embedded in any activation.**

This is equally true in both the physical and digital world. Brands should be focused on forming smart partnerships with agency experts and thought leaders who can help create guidelines around diversity, representation, and inclusion. More importantly, this also means bringing in expertise, experience, and perspective that reflect the diverse communities that you serve.

**“The number one thing any creator can do to be more inclusive is to literally include people. It’s that simple. Ensure as many types of identities, especially marginalized ones, are represented among creators during the entire life cycle of a product, from ideation to ongoing development. Ensure that people are in the room who you want to do right by, then listen to them. Better yet, step aside and let them lead.”**

– Paul Freibott,

Senior Director of Research at Assembly

Co-creation with consumers is key to learning how to safely and ethically enter the environment. Brands can allow customers to design and use their own avatars in a way they feel represents them, such as **Dior’s partnership with Ready Player Me** that generates customizable 3D avatars based on a submitted photo. Collaborating with metaverse communities can also mean bringing social values to the forefront while providing education and safe spaces for self-expression that can create lasting relationships beyond a product or skin.

## BE A PIONEER, NOT A PARTICIPANT:

**Demand better of the ecosystem and be an active part of the change required.**

Building an inclusive metaverse starts with how that very metaverse is built.

Some are leading in this regard, including design studios that have made it their mission to counter the white, male-led presence that currently dominates VR due to developer and investor demographics. A leader in 3D modeling, Daz 3D, consulted with a wide range of ethnic and cultural experts and organizations to improve representation, remove unconscious bias, and pursue more inclusive avatar standards. They **created a collection of 8,888 unique female and non-binary, hyper-realistic avatars** to allow people to celebrate their non-conforming identities and fuel a multi-gendered metaverse.

Inclusivity and representation in the metaverse is a complex subject that should not be addressed lightly, and we have no doubt that this lively discussion will continue for some time. Brands and creators alike should be prepared to answer questions around the purpose behind their engagement and the impact they are looking to make.

**After all, we are in the midst of creating the future we want to see.**



Photo Credit: Daz3D.com

