FirstRand

A (black) mirror to the metaverse

Author: Eugene Yiga

After a break of more than four years, season six of Black Mirror is finally here. As is typically the case for this award-winning television series, the episodes take a closer and darker look at society's dystopian side, but this time, they do so in a new way.

In the past, Black Mirror was more focused on technology, but this season includes episodes that speak to a wider cultural context, whether it's our obsession with celebrities ("Mazey Days") or our morbid fascination with true crime ("Loch Henry"). And while previous seasons of the show tend to be set in the not-too-distant future, this one includes throwbacks to the past, whether it's 1960s US ("Beyond the Sea") or 1970s UK ("Demon 79").

The episode that breaks these rules is the first one ("Joan is Awful"), which is also my favourite of the season. Its tone is self-referential and humorous, but it also has the same dark edge that has come to characterise much of the show. What makes it even better is how perfectly it speaks to society's newfound obsession with generative artificial intelligence and how so many of the tools that nobody can stop talking about were built thanks to us inadvertently signing our digital rights away because nobody does (or even can) read all the fine print.

Watching something that so closely reflects the zeitgeist got me thinking about another episode from all the way back in 2014. Entitled "White Christmas", it was more complicated than the standard linear narrative format and wasn't something I fully appreciated or understood at the time. But revisiting it again almost ten years later makes me realise just how layered and prescient it was, particularly as it speaks to four central themes that connect with the metaverse as it's being defined today.

The first of these is the idea of digitally replicated consciousness. One of the main storylines in "White Christmas" involves a technology that can create a digital copy of a person's consciousness, which can then be manipulated and controlled in a virtual environment. This digital consciousness, or "cookie", experiences time differently and can be subjected to isolation or forced to control smart home systems. This concept of a digital replication or extension of oneself mirrors some discussions around avatars or digital personas in the metaverse.

The second is about virtual time dilation. The episode plays with the idea of experiencing extended periods in virtual environments in mere seconds of real-world time. This dilation of time is a concept that's sometimes brought up in discussions about the metaverse, where users might feel as though they've spent longer periods in the digital space than in the physical world.

Third we have the idea of simulated realities. In "White Christmas" the digital consciousness experiences fully immersive virtual environments, either as a form of reward or punishment. The ability to create and control digital realms and experiences for users aligns with the idea of the metaverse as a space where users can jump between different virtual worlds and experiences.

Finally, there's the idea of interactivity. The interconnected storylines of the episode demonstrate different ways in which individuals can interact with digital realms, whether it's through the use of eye implants that can block people from one's vision (a sort of augmented reality) or by interacting with the digital consciousnesses of others.

Fast forward to the present day, and, even as many people look at cryptocurrency as a total scam, there's a vibrant community of pioneering artists who have embraced the brave new world of Web3. There's also a shared feeling amongst them that they're leaping into the unknown, which is what makes it so alluring. At the core, all their endeavours represent the

myriad ways humans express themselves. It's about fusing creative art with cutting-edge technology just to see how far they can push the boundaries of what's possible.

And yet there are practical applications too. For example, I recently heard an amusing anecdote that perfectly encapsulates the astounding evolution of this technology. A guy who specialises in crafting avatars was approached by a company that works on self-driving cars. They had a unique problem: how to test their system's responsiveness to drowsy drivers without putting real humans at risk. The ingenious solution? Use hyper-realistic 3D avatars. It's a testament to how swiftly technology is progressing, with avatars now so lifelike that they can be used to train machines in recognising human behaviours.

As one further contemplates the trajectory of our digital evolution, it's easy to see how our avatars might take up tasks on our behalf. For example, imagine a world where routine functions are handled by our digital counterparts, much like automated trading bots do in finance today. But as we dive deeper into this burgeoning digital realm, we must ask ourselves if merely mirroring our real-world experiences is the most innovative path forward. Should we not strive for more? Should we not aim to create rather than replicate?

This is one of the things we've learned since the days of Second Life back in the early 2000s. During this time of potential and pitfalls, those who ventured into selling virtual clothing, creating brand experiences, and exploring the virtual realm's commercial aspects soon faced evident challenges, from the steep learning curve for newcomers to constant technological lags. But even though Second Life offered a vast canvas, what was most striking was the fact that many of its users weren't looking for a mirrored life; they were looking for an escape. So why were some experiences simply reflecting mundane real-world tasks? This is the same question people are asking today, except now technology is finally in a position to answer it.

Right now, many people using the metaverse still lean towards photorealistic avatars by effectively choosing to replicate their physical selves online. But as the next generation grows up in a world intertwined with the digital, might they not be more open to abstract representations? The fact is our online personas are evolving, and the tools at our disposal empower us with the ability to adopt multiple identities, so much so that one can imagine a world where we effortlessly navigate different platforms with distinct personas.

Indeed, it's clear that as we move forward in this digital age, creativity and innovation should always eclipse mere replication. But whether or not it turns out that way is something we'll have to discover in time. Perhaps Black Mirror will give us the answer one day. Let's hope we don't have to wait another four years to find out how the story unfolds.