The German Association for the Digital Economy (BVDW) e.V. on the consultation of the European Commission:
"Virtual worlds (metaverses) – a vision for openness, safety and respect"

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Preliminary remarks

The German Association for the Digital Economy (BVDW) e.V. represents the interests of companies that operate data driven business models or whose value creation is based on the use and implementation of digital technologies. The basis for this economy is the intelligent combination of data and creativity with a simultaneous decisive orientation towards ethical principles. As the driving force, guide and accelerator of digital business models, BVDW represents the interests of the digital economy towards politics and society and aims for the creation of market transparency and framework conditions that encourage innovation. With figures, data and facts, its network of experts provides orientation for a central area of the future.

Introduction

The metaverse and Web3 as technological developments will revolutionize the Internet and how it has been used to date. Such far-reaching developments must be monitored by politics, the economy and society at an early stage to make them usable for everyone and to use them in a meaningful way.

BVDW therefore calls on policymakers to address this development at an early stage and to assign responsibilities at an appropriate level. It is also important to identify how existing regulation can be applied and, if necessary, adjusted. BVDW stands for the principle: What applies offline also applies online and should therefore also apply in the metaverse. At the same time, BVDW calls on policymakers to enter into a dialog with the industry at an early stage in the development of standards. Existing initiatives from the private sector should be used as a reference in this context. Society must also be involved in the discussion at an early stage to create acceptance and discuss opportunities and risks together.

The European Union should take a leading role in the establishment of this new technology and in doing so represent its values also internationally. Now is the time to set the right course for an open, inclusive technology that is committed to our values.

Responsibilities. Technology. Data.

The question of which responsibilities exist in the virtual space, that will be visible in the future in parallel to the real world, and who controls or regulates it, needs to be clarified on an overarching level. It is therefore important to establish international standards right from the start.

Policymakers should work with all stakeholders to ensure an open and compatible ecosystem that ensures interoperability between providers and platforms. In doing so, seamless user experience as well as data portability should be ensured. Diversity and innovation must be encouraged as well to enable a vibrant competitive environment within Europe and worldwide.

On the one hand, the protection of intellectual property should be clearly regulated in the metaverse. Companies and creative professionals can only be thereby in a position to invest sustainably in a new technological advancement such as the metaverse. On the other hand, security standards must be established that protect the data of providers and users alike from misuse. Data security is of crucial importance in the context of the metaverse.

Data Sovereignty. Regulation. Standards.

In addition to general data security, the protection of personal information and privacy as well as individual data sovereignty must also be considered in the metaverse. Therefore, there is a need for clear rules and mechanisms for handling data in the metaverse. According to the principle: what applies offline also applies online and should also apply in the metaverse, existing legislation is applied first. Then, barriers for innovation as well as regulatory gaps should be evaluated for the metaverse. A structured approach that balances user and business privacy needs is as important in the metaverse as it is in other areas of the data economy.

Policymakers should enter into a dialog with the industry at an early stage in the development of standards. In this context, it is also important to consider various requirements for data quality and data portability. All of this contributes to establishing fair competition in the metaverse and to creating a level playing field from the very beginning.

Last but not least, data-driven artificial intelligence and algorithms will play an even more important role in the metaverse than in previous areas of use. This is why both technological developments must be seen together and considered together in any initiative. In doing so, their interplay must be taken into account.

Competence. Education. Inclusion.

Involving all generations from the get-go is of high importance for a general acceptance of the metaverse. This includes the expansion and integration of digital education and media literacy into curricula and educational programs. For example, it should be ensured at school and professional level that the skills and knowledge to actively shape the metaverse on the one hand and also properly assess risks on the other hand are acquired. The metaverse can also be actively used in the school context to enable new learning experiences.

At the same time, the metaverse must be designed to be inclusive and diverse from the outset. This is the only way to ensure and promote the participation of everyone, including vulnerable groups. In this context, policymakers can set incentives by promoting best practice cases and develop guidelines together with the stakeholders involved.

Sustainability. Responsibility. Values.

Europe has now the opportunity to take ownership and drive a values-based approach with regards to the metaverse. Ethical discourses are important to discuss goals and forms of good action. In this context, policy should respond to changes in societal values as well as to new ethical issues raised by technological change. The goal should be an open and generally accessible metaverse in which freedom of expression prevails and adequate protection against illegal activities is guaranteed. To achieve this, it is essential that the metaverse becomes part of the discourse in society. This can be achieved by proactively promoting cooperation and exchange between the private sector, the creative industry, civil society, and government agencies in the metaverse environment.

The metaverse will only be able to become a technology of the future in today's world if energy-efficient technologies and practices are promoted that help reduce the metaverse's environmental footprint. This includes the use of renewable energy and more efficient servers.