

EU-funded OPENVERSE project explores how virtual worlds shape the real world

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Consortium of developers showcases the uses of virtual worlds, and a path toward common standards



From left to right: Lapo Fioretti (IDC), Francesco Panella (Martel Innovate), Ilaria Mariani (POLIMI), Lukasz Porwol (INS), and John Favaro (Trust-IT Services), at the OpenVerse Summit in Brussels Sept. 10. Credit: Openverse.

After years of development, many new applications are now fuelling a rise in virtual reality (VR) technology. Take the Dutch startup using VR to help neurodivergent teenagers navigate stressful situations—one of several examples showcased at a conference this month organised by the EU-funded OPENVERSE project.

Heerhugowaard-based [Changefied](#) has developed a range of VR simulations to help neurodivergent teenagers—such as those with autism—rehearse environments like airports, public transport systems and supermarkets. For instance, the transport simulator [challenges players](#) to reach their destination using both busses and trains. The VR simulates them entering the vehicles, swiping a transport card, finding a seat – and then getting back on track if they got off at the wrong stop.

It's one of countless examples of how virtual worlds, accessed through a screen or headset, can have real-world applications beyond just entertainment.

[OPENVERSE](#), a €2 million “coordination and support” initiative under the EU's Horizon Europe programme, brings together experts and innovators from academia and industry to develop and catalogue beneficial uses for virtual worlds, and to develop common standards for interoperability, privacy and security.

“We should not be merely consumers of what will come,” Anne Bajart, the European Commission's Deputy Head of Unit for Interactive Technologies, said in Brussels at the OPENVERSE conference Sept. 10. “We should really invent our own systems and our own way of doing it,” especially by protecting digital rights.

Proven benefits

A key criterion for the virtual worlds analysed by OPENVERSE is that they must be demonstrably useful, said Pierre Rossel, of OPENVERSE, President of Inspiring Futures.

“We're not looking for potential,” said Rossel. “We're looking for things that are used and qualified, and ethically compatible.” The project is concerned with “only those achievements that really generate something consistent, sustainable, and providing a real service.”

For example, Copenhagen-based [Heka VR](#) provides a virtual environment for schizophrenia patients who hear imaginary voices, helping them to manage these audio hallucinations, supported by a therapist.

“It's a project that was clinically validated and was under clinical trials for six years,” said Katherine Fremming, head of cultural partnerships at production studio [Khora](#), from which Heka VR spun out.

The patient and therapist work together to turn the voices into an avatar that the patient can confront in the virtual world. The therapist then takes on the role of the voices inside the virtual world, to help the patient develop coping strategies.

There are other mental health applications for virtual worlds—such as using mixed-reality representations of therapy animals as a substitute for real animals, which aren't always available, said Patricia Pons Tomás, a researcher at the Institut Tecnològic d'Informàtica (ITI) in Valencia.

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Indexing standards for virtual worlds

However, there are obstacles to development and adoption of virtual worlds in Europe.

A major challenge is navigating the standards that allow interoperability between virtual worlds—for example, so that users can move their avatars from one world to another. Standardisation is one of the core pillars of OpenVerse's work. Besides basic technical standards that allow systems to connect, there's also a need for common standards concerning privacy, security and ethics.

But the problem is too many standards rather than too few, said Christoph Runde, who helped compile a [virtual worlds standards register](#) at the [Virtual Dimension Center](#) in Fellbach, near Stuttgart.

Several major organisations have already developed standards for virtual worlds, including the NATO military alliance, he said. However, "If we have competing standards, of course it's a complicated situation," Runde told the audience in Brussels. "The problem is not scarcity, it's fragmentation."

A 'Who's Who' of VR

OPENVERSE has also built a public database of virtual worlds organisations, researchers and experts, called the OPENVERSE Observatory.

"The observatory is the repository of the OPENVERSE project results," said John Favaro, senior researcher at OPENVERSE participant Trust-IT Services.

"It's useful to anybody working in the virtual world space. There's a huge directory of companies, projects, European national initiatives, [...] information on regulatory reports and analyses," he said. "There are well over 350 companies and other organisations in the Observatory now, and they come from all over Europe—and, to some extent, the rest of the world."

A growing market in need of R&D funding

All this is happening as the European market for virtual worlds is growing.

In just one year, European organisations' willingness to adopt virtual worlds technology doubled to 40%, said Lapo Fioretti, senior research analyst at OPENVERSE consortium member IDC, a market research firm. "This was also matched by growing investment, which for our forecast is expected to more than double by 2030, and to reach €6 billion," he said.

The European Commission has committed some €200 million over 2025-2030 to the European Partnership for Virtual Worlds, a public-private initiative, and this sum is matched by the private sector. It has also awarded €2 million in OPENVERSE, which helped establish the partnership, from the Horizon Europe research programme.

Whether further funding will be available in the EU's next long-term budget remains uncertain. But further funding is needed, VR specialists say. "We have an issue across Europe where the client budgets are maybe ten times smaller than they are in the US, so it's very hard to compete," said Camille Donegan, CEO of Irish virtual worlds association Eirmersive.

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