BUILT FOR CHANGE EPISODE 19: RESPONSIBLE METAVERSE

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

0:00
JESSICA: So I had the pleasure of meeting Lual a few years ago.

JOSH: This is Jessica Lindl, Vice President of Social Impact at Unity Technologies.

JESSICA: He was a Sudanese refugee who grew up in a refugee camp in Uganda. He had always been really passionate about video games and his mother was a seamstress in the refugee camp and saved up for five years to be able to buy him his first computer.

ELISE: In fact, Lual ended up living in that refugee camp for twenty-two years, without school and sometimes without regular food. What Lual did have was his life experience, and an idea. He wondered if he could create a video game that would do some good in the world.

JESSICA: And the video game that he built was really about how to, um, achieve peace in a war-torn country.

JOSH: Using the Unity platform, Lual created a game that immerses players in what it feels like to be a refugee on the run,

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JOSH: searching for water, food, and medicine. Players would have to make the kinds of

decisions that Lual's own family faced.

ELISE: And the game took off. He started to get invitations to speak at developer conferences, to present the game and share his vision for virtual experiences.

JOSH: Lual Mayen was able to build – and share – something incredible in the virtual world that was based on his own experience. It's a rare kind of virtual experience, off the beaten path of the kind of games made by big developers. It took someone like Lual for this game to become a reality.

JESSICA: I think his story just really brings to life the inspiration and potential of what we call the metaverse today.

MUSIC OUT

ELISE: But not everyone in his position has a mom who can save money for years and buy a computer. So there are stories all around the globe that are going untold in digital spaces and in virtual experiences.

JESSICA: It's not that you don't even have the mobile phone. It's: you don't have the data plans, you don't have the electricity to be able to power it.

2:00

ELISE: In the refugee camp, Lual was walking three hours each way, every time he wanted to charge his computer.

JESSICA: The world is a better place with more creators in it, and not just more creators, but a more inclusive body of creators that can really tell the world's stories.

THEME IN

ELISE: Today, we're talking about the Metaverse, and what it will take to build it accessibly, inclusively, and responsibly.

JOSH: So the question really is what kind of digital world will we have if people like Lual aren't invited to help build it, and what kind of digital world will we have… if they are?

ELISE: I'm Elise Hu

JOSH: And I'm Josh Klein

ELISE: And this is Built for Change, a podcast from Accenture

ELISE: There's so many spaces we can be in the metaverse these days. And if we're able to lower the barrier to entry for creators to build virtual worlds, I imagine the metaverse could become an even more amazing and more diverse experience.

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JOSH: Absolutely. We'll come back to Lual's story and the tools of the Unity platform, but I think you're right, you know, making those development tools available to communities that don't currently have those resources. That's one important way that the metaverse really needs to develop.

ELISE: It sure does. I mean, and there's other barriers too. The metaverse needs to be secure and it has to be safe in order for people to join. And that's proven to be a tough challenge, even on the internet we have today.

JOSH: Yes. So in this episode, we're discussing today's opportunity to build a metaverse that's a place where people can feel welcome. We're gonna explore what that means for oversight, for privacy, governance, and more. So to get started, we're gonna dig into the question of how the metaverse builds on the internet as we know it today and how that gives us a chance to do things a little differently.

THEME OUT

DENISE: So some people think of the metaverse as a 3D world, accessed through VR goggles

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DENISE: where people embody avatars and play games.

JOSH: This is Denise Zheng, Accenture's Global Lead for Responsible Metaverse.

DENISE: But in reality, it's, you know, much more than that. I think the right way to think about the metaverse is that it's really the next iteration of the internet.

MUSIC

JOSH: Denise says in the early 1990s, the internet was initially designed to help scientists and universities collaborate around research. But in the early 2000s, more and more people were coming online, for information, shopping, and to create places that were their own. They joined web forums, built fan sites, and created personal profiles on social media.

JOSH: As we all know, as the internet grew, challenges grew with it.

DENISE: When social media got started, people had a difficult time sort of anticipating all of the possible scenarios. Now we see how that has played out and it's easy to imagine scenarios like we've seen in web two, play out in the metaverse.

5:00

JOSH: It makes sense that people are worried about the metaverse. After all, they're concerned that we're gonna all be sitting alone in the dark with our headsets on. But Denise says that's not what the metaverse should look like…

DENISE: The way to think about well-being is the question around how to create user experiences in the metaverse that really promote physical and mental health, that are additive to physical experiences rather than displacing it.

MUSIC OUT

JOSH: There are already people building some amazing metaverse experiences. Doctors are using 3D simulations to make surgery safer and faster. Virtual models of real equipment, called digital twins, are being used across architecture and infrastructure to map out complex building projects before they even begin. The metaverse has the potential to bring so much value to society, but…

DENISE: To unlock the value of the metaverse, we need to ensure that it's responsible by design.

MUSIC

JOSH: When Denise says "responsible by design,"

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JOSH: she has specific things in mind: key areas to address when we're thinking about the metaverse reaching its full potential. For starters, people need to have trust in how the technology of the metaverse is designed and implemented.

DENISE: It's the product policies, it's practices to protect the privacy of users and give them much more granular control, for example, of the data that's collected and how it's used and shared. And it's also security. So how we authenticate a person's identity across a platform in the metaverse and then also federate it to create a much more seamless user experience.

JOSH: Take the way that an approach to privacy has to change as the metaverse becomes more and more interconnected.

DENISE: Today, privacy in the internet is very fragmented. We have different approaches to privacy in the European union. And then in the United States alone, we have kind of a patchwork quilt of privacy laws.

JOSH: That fragmented legal approach is complicated by the fact that what we want online includes some opposite things.

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JOSH: Like on the one hand, we want privacy, and on the other, we want to have a robust digital identity that expresses who we are and connects us with others.

DENISE: And the challenge is figuring out how to apply those existing laws to the metaverse and then identifying where there are gaps and where there may be new norms or standards or regulations that we need to evolve to ensure things like fairness and consumer protection.

MUSIC OUT

JOSH: That can feel overwhelming, both for platforms and for users. But Denise says, we're not totally starting from scratch.

DENISE: A lot of the laws we see today governing privacy, for example GDPR in the European Union, or child online safety laws across the United States, these laws dictate how companies collect, use, and process personal data of online users today. And just as they apply today, they're going to apply in the metaverse tomorrow.

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JOSH: The more we experiment and question

the foundational elements of internet design, the more options we'll have when we're nailing down the essential features of our digital future.

DENISE: Whether it's product labeling or it's AI bot disclosures, these are new features that can be designed into an experience so that there's safety by default. I think that what we're going to see the market start to deliver more privacy and security because users do care. If users start to see value, they will start to demand it.

JOSH: And that safety goes beyond trusting platforms with our data and protecting our identities. The metaverse also needs to be a place where people can be safe in their interactions with others.

DENISE: This is going to require a lot of attention and focus. So take, for example, the moderation of harmful content and behavior, which is gonna be even more complex in the metaverse.

MUSIC OUT

DENISE: Rather than looking for individual instances of harmful behavior,

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DENISE: how can we identify patterns of malicious user behavior in the metaverse and how can we then rely more on identifying that pattern and suspending accounts, rather than looking at each individual piece of content?

JOSH: At the same time, the design of metaverse spaces can also encourage safe behavior, like the bumpers on a bowling lane, to be sure we reach our desired destination...

DENISE: There's an example of a gaming platform that's designed for children where initially, when you start playing the game. You can't actually speak to other users in the game.

MUSIC

DENISE: You have to demonstrate a sort of degree of, of caring and responsibility before you're allowed to interact with other people and to speak. It is an example of a company that's being very thoughtful about how to create a safe space

10:00

DENISE: for children and how to discourage bad behavior.

JOSH: Right now, the metaverse is new and rapidly expanding. Denise suggests we build in the kind of protections that we sometimes take for granted in our day-to-day lives.

DENISE: When you wake up in the morning and you have a bowl of cereal, you might turn the box around and look at the nutrition label. And the nutrition label clearly defines, you know, the number of calories, how much saturated fat, how many carbohydrates, etc. Imagine having sort of a nutrition label for the metaverse so that before you enter a metaverse world, you know exactly what to expect, you know, exactly what you're signing up for

JOSH: Sorting out content moderation and user safety is complicated, no doubt. And different settings will have different needs. As leaders enter the space, and get to work on building out safe and satisfying experiences, Denise and the team at Accenture suggest starting with a mindset of collaboration…

DENISE: We're gonna need to bring together

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DENISE: a stakeholder community of users, of creators, of builders, along with academics, along with policy makers and consumer advocates as well. And together we're gonna need to co-design, co-create and innovate the metaverse together to ensure that it's responsible by design.

MUSIC OUT

ELISE: It's such an important reminder that we really consider who is making the metaverse. And whose perspectives might be missing. Right?

JOSH: Yeah.

ELISE: Like, I think of the elderly in particular as this really rich population of ideas and experiences, but aren't building the metaverse necessarily. And so we need to make sure that those voices are incorporated.

JOSH: I mean, I think that's a great point and the other side of that is that that's a population that could really benefit from being involved in the metaverse.

ELISE: Yeah. Like Denise says, building a metaverse that really lives up to all of us and lives up to our hopes is going to require input from all kinds of people.

JOSH: Yeah. It's just like the story we heard earlier

12:00

JOSH: from Jessica Lindl at Unity, you know, Lual is contributing to the future of the metaverse by making sure that people like him, you know, migrants, refugees around the world have a say in how it takes shape. And Jessica actually told us a few more stories that explore the potential of the metaverse starting with her own.

MUSIC

JESSICA: I had the privilege to run a company that used the power of video games that kids would play every day, to look at how we could leverage those video games for learning purposes.

JOSH: The more work Jessica did, the more she realized the massive potential not just in gaming, but in the skills that came with playing, and creating, those games. Because those skills looked a lot like what someone would need to

begin building the metaverse.

JESSICA: If we could unlock the very skills that young people needed to create video games, we could mobilize many, many millions of people into careers of the 21st century.

13:00

JOSH: And that's where Jessica's work, and her move into Unity as the lead for Social Impact, links up with the story of people like Lual Mayen.

JESSICA: We had the opportunity to support him last year with a grant that was focusing on 500 refugees and the refugee camp that he grew up in, in learning the Unity, 3D technical artist skills.

JOSH: Unity's core product is the platform and tools that people use to create 3D experiences. What began as a toolset for games and animation, is now the industry standard for building metaverse experiences of all kinds, from augmented reality to extended reality, or XR. And it's being used by more and more people all the time.

JESSICA: And I think what we see with the metaverse and the demand for these jobs, I mean, the demand is growing 600% faster than the average IT job demand is right now. And the salary increase is just significant at almost 60% greater

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JESSICA: than the average IT job. So I think the the speed at which we can move and the scale is unprecedented.

JOSH: Lual joins a massive creative wave building the present and future of digital life. Unity realized that as a major player in the metaverse space, they had a responsibility.

JOSH: They wouldn't take a back seat when it came to building an accessible and equitable metaverse. Instead, they'd do the work to make sure that that happened.

MUSIC OUT

JESSICA: If we only focused on sort of a market driven approach to demand and the whole pipeline of developers, we weren't actually gonna be able to make a shift in, who actually had the opportunity to tell their own stories.

JOSH: Unity realized that they didn't need to re-invent the process. Communities around the world were already working on how to connect people with jobs, and that gave Unity the chance to lend their global network to situations where it could do the most good.

JESSICA: Many communities are now taking an ecosystem approach, where a community decides that they will

15:00

JESSICA: actually bring together government funding that they want to use to upskill their citizens and really get them prepared for 21st century jobs and earning opportunities. They then provide those funds to local nonprofit partners, and then also motivate the employers in their region to hire those graduates.

JOSH: And that process of bringing people around the globe into the work of building the metaverse, it can start with the people who already know Unity: gamers.

JESSICA: Over 70% of young people are actively playing video games today. So we do quite a bit of work in giving them the tools and motivation to start modding the video games that they're playing actively today.

JOSH: Unity's approach is to take deeply engaged players, and encourage them to start modifying the games they love, tinkering with the pieces behind the scenes. That journey, from player to modder, starts the track that leads modders to become

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JOSH: fully-fledged creators, as they take on the coding and design skills needed to create in the metaverse.

JESSICA: We're lucky enough to be in over 190 countries where young people are actively learning unity in their school programs, and this is either part of a computer science program or a digital arts program, or even an after-school program. And that's really, I think, unlocking the intrinsic motivation and passion of young people around the world.

JOSH: And the pathway isn't only open to young people.

JESSICA: Learning is no longer something that we just do in the first phase of our life. It's actually a continuous learning process for all of our careers. And so our work is really around connecting learning to earning opportunities quickly for all adults around the world.

JOSH: When they're choosing partnerships, Jessica says they're not neutral in the goals they set for themselves. Whether they're training students or upskilling workers, they're guided by their values first.

MUSIC

JESSICA: By making sure that we worked with programs, schools, universities

17:00

JESSICA: that were focusing on underrepresented groups to make future creators as inclusive as possible.

JOSH: For instance, Unity has partnered with a number of historically black colleges and universities, providing the tools to build their online metaversities.

JESSICA: A metaversity is really the entire university experience in the metaverse.

JOSH: At one HBCU in Georgia, history classes

build metaverse experiences to make history come alive…

JESSICA: really retelling America's history from a more inclusive perspective. And also being able to personally experience that version of history I think has been really powerful in a digital immersive setting for those students.

MUSIC OUT

JOSH: But it's not just taking your classes. One science professor responded to the pandemic shutdowns by building social experiences for students.

JESSICA: She's built out with other professors all of the, the classes that the young men can take as well as doing an entire ball,

18:00

JESSICA: they did their dance, uh, in the metaverse. They also have community events like Mindfulness Mondays, where they meet together within the metaverse and have the opportunity to connect virtually. So it's also the social experiences that one can have and the community that can happen as a result of being in the metaverse.

JOSH: Unity's work started with games, but because they have invited collaboration from a diverse range of creators, they have proven that the metaverse's impact can be much more wide-reaching…

JESSICA: We've got about 5 million creators around the world, and many more coming because a lot of our work is building the future creator base.

MUSIC

JESSICA: Those 5 million creators publish to about 3.9 billion mobile devices. And that is about 70% of the XR experiences being built today.

JOSH: In the medical field, a team of creators built a doctor's training experience…

JESSICA: which re-skills about a million doctors, for the ongoing accreditations that they need.

19:00

JOSH: In Indonesia, a team concerned with ocean plastics created a gaming experience…

JESSICA: all about learning to pick up plastics and keeping our oceans clean.

JOSH: In the apparel industry, a reskilling application…

JESSICA: for seamstresses in Bangladesh to upskill them into more advanced levels of sewing.

JOSH: In working toward a metaverse that's responsible by design, Jessica says the goal has to be a low barrier to entry for people around the world.

JESSICA: We have an open call to all of our partners to collaborate with us on building a more inclusive metaverse.

MUSIC OUT

ELISE: Josh, it's just wild how immersive learning has gotten. I mean when I was in school, in elementary school, you know, like, learning typing, I remember typing games.

JOSH: But then now like, like just today, my kids wanted to, to make a crazy picture. And so we jumped online and started chatting with an AI that was then rendering photorealistic pictures.

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JOSH: Like that's where we are now — "let's make some art dad, we'll just talk to the AI!"

ELISE: So with Unity, we've learned about metaverse projects being built around the world

and across industries, including these new training programs, to bring people in on the ground floor who are building the next chapter of the metaverse itself.

JOSH: Yeah. Yeah. And it just makes sense that if we're gonna make a metaverse that is welcoming to all kinds of people, then all kinds of people have to build that metaverse.

ELISE: Absolutely. As business leaders build partnerships with creators around the world, they also need to have the same approach to the technical side of the work, right? Inclusion and openness to a variety of voices needs to be a central element of metaverse strategy.

JOSH: Yes. So next we're gonna explore how the unanswered questions and unsolved problems in the metaverse offer leaders some amazing opportunities....

MUSIC

ELI: When you're at these inflection points, potentially that impact the future of humanity, it's worth

21:00

ELI: sort of sitting with something and, and reflecting saying, okay, like if we're gonna have a tiny little piece of this what is our legacy gonna be moving to this brave new world?

JOSH: This is Eli Sugarman. He started his career as a diplomat working on international security issues. Over time, that work led him to a consulting firm…

ELI: helping clients manage risk in some emerging markets and a lot of those projects were around mobile banking, wireless spectrum, and then continued this circuitous path, um, to philanthropy and really wanting to figure out how to help improve people's lives, but then also tackling some of these hard technology challenges.

JOSH: Eventually, Eli took a position working with one of the biggest social media platforms, trying to solve some of their biggest questions…

ELI: I joined a very experimental and exciting online speech and content regulator. Took on a leadership role there, helped build out some teams and participated in some pretty interesting work, trying to do better content moderation at scale, and really enshrining human rights values in their work.

22:00

JOSH: And his vision of the metaverse? It's one I might like to try myself.

MUSIC

ELI: What you really want is you want to ensure that it's a haven for creativity, connection, um, really helping society unlock potential to innovate, to explore, to come together, as opposed to be beset by all sorts of nasty harms.

JOSH: So who is going to make that vision a reality?

ELI: if you look at major tech players, gobbling up gaming companies and then rebranding themselves, you know, it's obvious that like they see a ton of potential and the future of the interconnected world in the metaverse, or they have different approaches based upon where they are situated, but have a very sophisticated reason for why they're spending billions and billions of dollars.

JOSH: But despite all of that money being invested, there are a lot of open questions. As we've been exploring already in this episode, building the systems to run behind the scenes is a challenge. How do we get to the privacy, security, openness, and inclusivity all at once?

23:00

ELI: I don't think anybody has really solved any of these problems yet at scale. And, and that,

that is like not to criticize people. It's just to acknowledge a reality that as all of these different spaces merge together, having an integrated model or solution to any one of these big challenges is just really, really hard.

MUSIC OUT

JOSH: So let's explore some of those hard problems, the ones that haven't quite been cracked, and look at the ways they create openings for innovative thinkers to make a real difference.

MUSIC

ELI: An area that I don't think is getting enough funding or attention is really sort of, okay, so in these environments, how do we then keep people safe? And what most people don't know is the technology stack and tools to do that in current social media and gaming is like really immature.

JOSH: Eli says that most trust and safety tools— like language processing—only work in English, and with English language content.

ELI: It isn't like there are these like massive off the shelf solutions that are small and medium sized platform can just adopt and be like, I've got a top tier trust and safety,

24:00

ELI: just turnkey kit, like that doesn't exist.

JOSH: Sure, there are some tools for monitoring text, but metaverse spaces are fully immersive...

ELI: Detecting harmful behavior and doing something about it is harder than detecting, like, did I write a bad word or use a slur in a chat box? Right. And, and you have to do all of those things in real time, synchronized. Otherwise you're relying on sort of people to flag it and report it.

JOSH: Another difficult problem? The ways that

issues of identity and access collide.

ELI: Think about the challenges of doing age verification, right. To make sure that, that, that minors of a certain age aren't exposed to certain content that's really hard to do. And so if you think about how that's done right now, you know, there is basically like one widely used system super awesome to do that, thankfully that's generally widely available, but, there are gonna need to be enhanced solutions to do that in other ways. So it's not just age-gating, but, but other ways

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ELI: to sort of verify identity, to keep people safe without again, requiring, and then consolidating too much personal information that can then be aggregated and used for harm by others.

JOSH: Another tricky aspect of these complicated questions is… whose job is it to keep us safe in the metaverse?

ELI: To be honest, there is no broad scale policing by a police force to keep you safe online in any meaningful sense. Everybody has some responsibility and, and we need to have a much better conversation about who is responsible for what.

JOSH: Eli says that first and foremost, he believes that the responsibility is in the hands of the platforms.

ELI: They are building the thing, they are building the technology, they are building the metaverse. Governments, like in most rapidly evolving technical areas, are gonna be late to the game. They're gonna not understand them fundamentally, and they're gonna play catch up.

JOSH: So companies working in the metaverse space need to open up their own process to a variety of voices. That means that before companies are held accountable by governments,

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JOSH: they need to be willing to be held accountable internally—for starters, by their everyday users.

MUSIC

ELI: You need different viewpoints, different backgrounds, otherwise you're just gonna miss big, um, big issues and, and answers to them. And when you think about those hard trade-offs about what the future of the world and the future of the internet is—the viewpoint of civil society and average people really needs to be taken into account.

JOSH: Of course, companies tend to be guarded about their data. But companies expanding into the metaverse need to show users that their experience will be safe and inclusive and that requires transparency.

ELI: The challenge is that when all that data is held proprietarily that it's really hard to have an informed viewpoint. And so I think a very basic bare minimum is you just need to show what's happening and explain it in a way that's accessible. You need to let third parties validate that.

JOSH: And Eli says letting people see behind the curtain has clear benefits.

ELI: The incentives are, you can differentiate your brand

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ELI: to say, we are the safe place. If your children are spending a lot of time online, you want them online with us because we're gonna keep them safe. Or if you come from a certain community, you can come and you can meet other people. You can flourish. You can be you, your whole self and, and create and communicate without fear of people bullying you, hate speech, whatever nasty underbelly of the internet you're afraid of.

MUSIC OUT

JOSH: To navigate the complex map that's still being drawn, and to build the kind of team that it will require to do this right, Eli suggests that c-suites add a new member to think about all of this strategically.

ELI: Companies in the metaverse are gonna need chief trust officers, right. Analogous to like a chief information security officer.

THEME

ELI: You want people to come to your part of the metaverse because it is safe and enjoyable and fun and cool, and all this great stuff. And if you're getting bullied and harassed and all this stuff, like, you're not gonna do it. And so therefore you need somebody who's in the c-suite really thinking about this strategically.

JOSH: There is opportunity in those unanswered questions.

28:00

JOSH: And if it's anything, the metaverse is a place to organize around hard problems, and bring to bear the resources to solve them.

ELI: I think there is a powerful argument that if the metaverse is a haven for organizing, for creativity, you can potentially galvanize action around the world on these really challenging, you know, problems.

ELISE: You know, I love hearing all these suggestions, Josh, especially about community moderation and transparency, because as we both know, you know, the social web could, could really benefit from it.

JOSH: Yeah. There's, there's been some problems, you know, social media. I mean, even the, the games that we play, those are all places where this content moderation and data privacy, they haven't quite got 'em right yet. So it really seems like as we develop the metaverse, we've

got a chance, right? We've got a chance to lower the barrier to entry and invite new voices into the process of creating that world.

ELISE: Absolutely. And it's so important that we're talking about it now on the front end, right.

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ELISE: As the metaverse is still taking shape. Trust and safety are gonna be a big part of opening the door for more people, more voices to participate.

JOSH:To learn more about Accenture's recommendations for building a metaverse that's responsible by design, visit Accenture dot com slash Built For Change.

ELISE: Thanks to Accenture's Denise Zheng.
JOSH: And to Jessica Lindl and Eli Sugarman for talking with us!

ELISE: Built For Change is a podcast from Accenture.

JOSH: More episodes are coming soon. Follow, subscribe, and if you like what you hear, leave us a review.

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