People try metaverse applications at an exhibition in Zhangjiang, where Shanghai's first metaverse industry alliance was founded recently. — Zhu Shenshen

# Buzzword today, mainstream way of life tomorrow



A metaverse-style conference was held in Shanghai recently, with virtual front desk, meeting rooms and elevators. — Zhu Shenshen

**Zhu Shenshen**

While many of us are scratching our heads over what "metaverse" means, some Shanghai technology companies are busy researching how to make this blockbuster digital trend even better and more profitable.

The "meta" world is the hot new buzzword in Shanghai. It might be defined as a simulated three-dimensional digital environment that blends augmented reality, virtual reality and blockchain technology with social media concepts to create a "space" that mimics the real world and is rich in user interaction.

The term "metaverse" was first coined by Neal Stephenson in his 1992 science fiction novel "Snow Crash," where humans, as programmable avatars, interact with each other and software agents, in a metaphor of the real world.

This emerging virtual realm is teeming with commercial potential, and Shanghai is at the forefront of its development in China to cash in on the trend. In fact, the city was the first in China to include metaverse in its long-term development plans, with accompanying economic support.

Local firms, including many smaller companies, are developing "components" of the metaverse, covering industries like urban management, entertainment, culture and marketing. Developments include work on super-realistic avatars with simulated human wrinkles and blood structures, and a digital "twin" industrial park copied in detail from the physical world.

Shanghai says it will actively guide and stimulate creativity of market players, allowing enterprises to address market demand, said Qiu Wei, a senior official at the Shanghai Commission of Economy and Informatization. "The principle is to use the virtual to empower the real economy and society."

It's a strategy different from the path chosen in the West, where technology giants like Meta (formerly Facebook) and Google are pioneering the new realm.

These Western companies invest heavily in metaverse worlds connecting several millions or even billions of users. They often use social networks, streaming services and video game platforms to attract people to the virtual metaverse, which isn't necessarily interconnected with the real-world economy.

Shanghai's first metaverse industry alliance was formed in July in Zhangjiang in the Pudong New Area. Zhangjiang is home to many chip,