



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology

Future Networks
Next-Generation Internet

Brussels, 19 September 2024

Meeting minutes
High Level Group on Internet Governance (HLIG) – sub-group on Governance of Virtual Worlds
17 September 2024
 Online meeting
 (Webex)

Open forum session 10:00 – 12:00

Participation

HLIG members and observers from the governments of: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Croatia, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Slovakia, Sweden.

Stakeholders: UNESCO, Council of Europe, PPMI Group, RIPE NCC, iNGO European Media Platform, EuroDIG, UN IGF Secretariat, Stiftung Digitale Chancen / Digital Opportunities Foundation, TNO, Synenergy, ICANN, ECTA, Motion Picture Association, Internet Integrity Task Force, IITF, GSMA, Open-Xchange AG, AK Public Affairs, EUIPO, International Trademark Association (INTA), DENIC eG, Avv. Ivett Paulovics Law Firm, eco - Association of the Internet Industry, United Nations University – CRIS, SIDN, German Commission for UNESCO, University of Aarhus, Com Laude, IMPF, 419 Consulting, ETNO

Opening remarks - Adoption of the agenda

The Chair of the meeting, the Head of Unit of Unit E3 – Next Generation Internet, welcomed the participants attending the open forum session of this HLIG sub-group meeting on governance of Virtual Worlds and provided logistics information before adopting the agenda.

Introduction from the European Commission

The Chair recalled [Communication on An EU initiative on Web 4.0 and virtual worlds](#), which defines the concepts of Virtual Worlds and Web 4.0 and provides the mandate for European Commission’s work and the background for the reflections of the sub-group. The Chair also reminded that the Commission is currently implementing the three key activities to follow up on Action 9 of the Communication and notably:

- *Informal consultations with multi stakeholder institutions,*
- *Establishment of a High-Level Internet Governance (HLIG) sub-group on governance of Virtual Worlds,*
- *Organization of a Global Multi Stakeholder Conference on governance of Virtual Worlds and Web 4.0.*

With regards to the Global Multi Stakeholder Conference, the Chair shared a “save the date” for the 31st of March and 1st of April 2024 and reiterated that the event is co-organised by the

European Commission and the upcoming Polish Presidency. The Chair also indicated that registrations would open in October and that there will be three background papers informing the conference discussions, which will be shaped based on input from the community.

Development of the conference background material and papers

The chair introduced the contractors from the PPMI group and TNO tasked to develop the background papers for the conference. The contractors explained in detail the objective of their assignment and the methodological approach underpinning the papers. They highlighted that:

- The project focuses on two streams of work, one aimed at assessing the key developments in internet technologies and blockchain relevant to Web 4.0 and virtual worlds and the second, more relevant for this sub-group, aimed at facilitating an informed and concrete global debate and deriving a consensus-based set of governance principles and recommendations.
- The output of the second workstream will be three papers: a consensus-based technical paper, a consensus-based policy paper and a background paper. All of them will build on extensive consultations including interviews, workshops, and a survey.
- There will be several opportunities for the community and the sub-group to engage, including through the policy workshop (22 October), technical workshop (24 October) and validation workshop (20 November) and the survey which will be launched soon.

The consultants also invited the sub-group member to check the project [website](#) and join the [mailing list](#) to remain up to date with the project activities.

Reflections, visions, and existing initiatives on governance of Virtual Worlds

Ms. *Isabel De Peuter-Rutten*, from Euromersive, presented the organisation's vision for governing Virtual Worlds. In a context characterised by a transformation of digital, from the Internet of Things to an internet of experiences, there are immense opportunities and profound responsibilities when it comes to governance of Virtual Worlds. Challenges pertaining to Virtual Worlds include understanding the why (what is their added value for humans), privacy and ethics, sustainable infrastructure, impacts on labour law, healthcare, taxes and legislation as well as educating people to this new medium. Euromersive advocates for a people first approach which focuses on keeping technology at the service of humanity, not imposing standardised / one fits all experiences but embracing human diversity and prioritising people when building virtual realities, which means building liveable online communities. Euromersive also advocates for responsible innovation (which prioritise the "why" we create something) and ethics by design. Based on Euromersive's vision, an ethical governance of Virtual Worlds will entail several building blocks including, beyond ethics by design, education and critical thinking, security and privacy, inclusion and equality, adaptability and agility, communication and interpretation as well as creativity and authenticity. To conclude, the speaker highlighted the importance for Europe to compete globally and stop the brain drain.

Mr. *Jean De Meyere*, from KUL, presented his ongoing research on user safety in Virtual Worlds. The speaker started by highlighting recent reports of crimes being committed in the Metaverse, including virtual rape and sexual harassment. Currently, different virtual world platforms exist, providing different environment with limited to no interoperability. In this context, safety is a multifaceted concept encompassing aspects such as plural threats (physical, mental and threats to social stability), anonymity, jurisdiction and enforcement, relation to avatar and digital identity as well as types of immersive experience. All these distinct factors influence safety considerations. Some of these factors also play a role in relation to content moderation in Virtual Worlds. From the perspective of content moderation, one of the biggest

challenges is the “content form” which is *experiences* rather than *texts*. Moderating behaviour is more difficult than moderating other forms of contents. Sometimes moderation is AI based but this generates other types of risks for users. While the Digital Service Act establishes certain requirements which also apply to Virtual Worlds, this legislation does not protect users against all harms in Virtual Worlds environments. The speaker concluded that more work is needed for instance in terms of development of risk assessment frameworks (like in the AI act), use of sandboxes, safety and ethics by design as well as interoperability between virtual worlds environments.

Ms. *Lise Fuhr*, member of the IGF leadership panel and from Connect Europe, shared some views on the most important considerations for discussing governance of Virtual Worlds. First the speaker highlighted the need to focus on connectivity as a prerequisite for deploying this technology. Networks will require more capacity – due to immense increase in data traffic - and to be more performing and interoperable to adapt to Virtual Worlds. Telco operators will need investments and an EU roll up of mobile and broadband infrastructure to cope. Secondly, governance will have an immense impact on the evolution of Virtual Worlds. The multi-stakeholder model is going to be very useful in this context. The Internet Governance Forum (IGF) has evolved significantly, and its discussions now cover many topics. This community is therefore ready to cover the issues related to Virtual Worlds. The speaker indicated that it is very important to have every stakeholder involved and not to rely on top down approaches. The Global Digital Compact (GDC) sets out some ambitious goals in relation to digital governance and IGF can be further empowered to monitor the GDC. Third, the speaker mentioned that standardisation is something often forgotten but essential. There needs to be open multi stakeholder discussions amongst the standardisation communities to ensure technical interoperability and global reach of technologies. The global technical community should help guide the discussions on governance of virtual worlds. The speaker concluded underlying the importance of sending clear messages about our EU values and our support for an inclusive, interoperable and digital future for all. Setting high standards in fact can inspire others.

Mr. *Javier Ruiz Diaz*, from Consumers International and EDRI, started his intervention noting that consumer associations do not have enough resources now to dedicate to Virtual Worlds topics as these are more forward looking areas and there is an overload of work with current issues already. Nonetheless, the general principle for governing Virtual Worlds should be applying existing legislation and policies consistently, before creating new regulations. Furthermore, there are a lot of open questions from a global perspective, including for instance what a low internet Virtual World experience could look like for people from less resourced countries. Other questions are not new, such as privacy and collection of personal data including facial data or motion data, online harms and intrusiveness, consumer rights. There are also studies on the impact of immersiveness on the human brain. Finally, the Norwegian Consumer Council has recently carried out a study on virtual money which provides some insights on the challenges with digital currencies in virtual spaces. On the governance side, now everything is governed by terms and conditions. It would be important to understand how we move from there to a multi-stakeholder model. Interoperability also remains crucial although seems to be perceived as quite a challenge at this stage. It is unclear how interoperability would look like in terms of avatars and assets as well as in terms of standards, to avoid the default adoption of the standards from the strongest industry player. Environmental impact also remains a concern.

Conclusion and AOB

The Chair of the meeting thanked all participants and highlighted that more discussions will follow during the next meeting which will take place in the autumn.

HLIG sub-group members closed session 14:00 – 16:00

Participation

HLIG members from the governments of: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Croatia, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Slovakia, Sweden.

Introductory remarks

The Chair of the meeting, the Head of Unit of Unit E3 – Next Generation Internet, welcomed the Member States and launched a tour de table of introduction.

Policy updates from the European Commission

DG CNECT shared an update on the current activities related to Virtual Worlds and Web 4.0 and stemming from the abovementioned Communication. Updates focused on the work of the Steering Group on Virtual Worlds and the several planned activities related to regulatory sandboxes.

The chair then shared more detailed information on the structure of the agenda and the sideline activities, including networking opportunities, of the High Level conference as well as on the contents and objectives of the conference background papers. Finally, DG CNECT shed some light on the links between the Global Digital Compact and the WSIS+20 negotiations and the expected outcomes of the High Level conference. DG CNECT also highlighted that the European Commission is preparing an IGF 2024 session titled “The Governance of the Future Internet: the 2025 web conference” on the topic of governance of Virtual Worlds and Web 4.0. Learnings from this session will also feed into the conference.

Updates from the upcoming Polish Presidency on the activities linked to the Conference

A representative from the upcoming Polish Presidency gave a short introduction to the Presidency’s plans and activities related to internet governance and governance of Virtual Worlds and Web 4.0, both in connection to the High Level conference and beyond.

Presentation from the consultants developing the conference papers

The consultants tasked to develop the background papers for the conference gave a short presentation focusing on the avenues for Member States to provide input, including through interviews, participation in the policy, technical and validation workshops and participation in a future sub-group meeting dedicated to the papers.

Continuation of the discussion on future of governance of virtual worlds – opportunities and challenges

A Member State introduced its current country state of thinking in relation to the state of Virtual Worlds and Web 4.0, the governance opportunities and challenges, the importance of leveraging some internet governance principles to set up a relevant global governance approach for Virtual Worlds and Web 4.0 and the need to continue discussing this topic. Following this presentation the chair reiterated that there are a few key questions on which Member States’ input would be particularly appreciated, especially ahead of the High Level conference and in view of developing consensus-based papers. The chair strongly encouraged Member States to participate in the consultations organised by the consultants.

Conclusions and next steps

The chair of the group thanked all Member States for their active participation and announced that a third meeting would be organised most likely in October with the same format.