

GITEX 2022 was a chance for e& and other companies in the UAE to showcase their metaverse plans

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Metaverse was the highlight of the Gulf Information Technology Exhibition (GITEX) in October 2022. A few UAE-based state-owned companies and government departments announced their plans for the metaverse while regional telecoms group, e& (formerly Etisalat), soft-launched 'e& universe', its metaverse platform, and confirmed its plan to introduce 'ifland', SK Telecom's virtual social media platform, to the UAE in late 2022.

Most of the metaverse demonstrations at GITEX were far from being market-ready but they highlight the UAE's willingness to lead [metaverse development](#) in the region and emphasise the importance of this event for raising consumer and business awareness of the metaverse's potential.

UAE's public and private organisations made their first steps in the metaverse in 2022

GITEX was held in Dubai in October 2022. It is the main technology event for service providers and technology vendors in the Middle East to share their visions for the future. As with previous events, this year's participants demonstrated prototypes of autonomous robots, flying cars, robots and AI applications.

UAE-based public organisations and government departments were present at the event to reveal their technology roadmaps and ongoing digitisation projects. A few also announced their first steps in the metaverse.

- The **Dubai Electricity and Water Authority (DEWA)** launched its 'DewaVerse' platform becoming one of the first local government organisations to provide services in the metaverse to customers (such as making payments and getting support) and employees (for example, to hold meetings and brainstorming sessions).
- The **Dubai Airport Freezone**, a free economic area for businesses, introduced the 'METADAFZ', to enable its prospective clients to virtually interact with its staff.
- The **Sharjah Commerce and Tourism Development Authority (SCTDA)** launched the 'SharjahVerse', a tourism platform to virtually experience the emirate's tourism offerings.
- The **Department of Municipalities and Transport (DMT)** of Abu Dhabi launched the 'Abu Dhabi Digital Twin' project, a photorealistic and synchronous virtual representation of the emirate, which provides data and measurements to help with city operations and planning.
- Dubai's **Road and Transport Authority (RTA)** signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with du (EITC) to develop a digital twin for the metro network to improve predictive maintenance. TRA considers it as the first step towards a greater presence in the metaverse.

GITEX was also an opportunity for UAE-based global businesses to confirm their commitment to the metaverse. For example, port operator **DP World** plans to release a VR platform, 'DPMETAWORLD', by the

end of 2022 to explore metaverse applications for container and vessel inspection, simulations of warehousing and terminal operations to solve supply-chain challenges.

These announcements follow the launch of the Dubai Metaverse Strategy in July 2022. The government's ambitions with this strategy are manifold including putting Dubai in the top 10 metaverse economies globally, contributing USD4 billion to GDP and creating 40 000 jobs by 2030.

e& is the first telecoms group in the Middle East to commit to the metaverse with the launch of its branded virtual world

Fewer operators were present at GITEX in 2022 than in previous years. However, e& had one of the largest stands showcasing metaverse use cases for consumers and businesses, which it built with local and international partners.

e& announced its partnership with SK Telecom to offer its subscribers access to 'ifland', SK Telecom's virtual social media platform where consumers can meet in virtual space using avatars.¹ This was part of SK Telecom's expansion plan to make the 'ifland' platform available in 80 countries in 2022, including in Europe and North America.

We understand that the service will initially be tested in the UAE with some e& customers before the commercial launch at the end of 2022. At GITEX, there was limited information on the extent to which the 'ifland' app and content will be localised; for example, avatars with local attire were available but there were no modelled local landmarks or cities and the user interface was not available in Arabic. It is also unclear whether e& will adopt a similar business model to SK Telecom to monetise 'ifland'; that is, to allow businesses to set up a virtual presence and reward content creators using in-metaverse currency to encourage user engagement and create a virtual economy.

e& also had two demonstrations that were more proofs-of-concept than products ready for commercialisation.

- It announced the soft launch of the region's first operator-branded virtual world, 'e& universe', built using HTC VIVA's VIVERSE technology, where users can virtually visit e&'s stand.
- 'Etisalat by e&'s business centre', developed in collaboration with Huawei, allows visitors to navigate through a 3D representation of the operator's store and make purchases.

GITEX can help to bridge the awareness gap among consumers and businesses regarding the potential of the metaverse

We asked 3000 smartphone users in Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia and the UAE between July and August 2022 about their familiarity with terms such as the metaverse and non-fungible tokens (NFTs). Around half of the respondents had either never heard of the metaverse or NFTs or had heard of these terms but did not know what they were.

¹ SK Telecom launched ifland in July 2021 and reported 8.5 million active users in South Korea in June 2022.

Events such as GITEX can help to increase awareness of the metaverse and related technologies such as NFTs among the wider population. Such events enable visitors to have first-hand experience of the metaverse using different interaction mediums including large screens, smartphones, game controllers and VR headsets.

GITEX was also an opportunity for UAE-based organisations, including e&, to confirm their aspirations to be at the forefront of the development of the [emerging metaverse ecosystem](#) in the region. By investing early in platforms and experimenting with the technologies, they will be well-positioned to understand the market, adapt their services to the new environment and envision [future commercial opportunities](#).