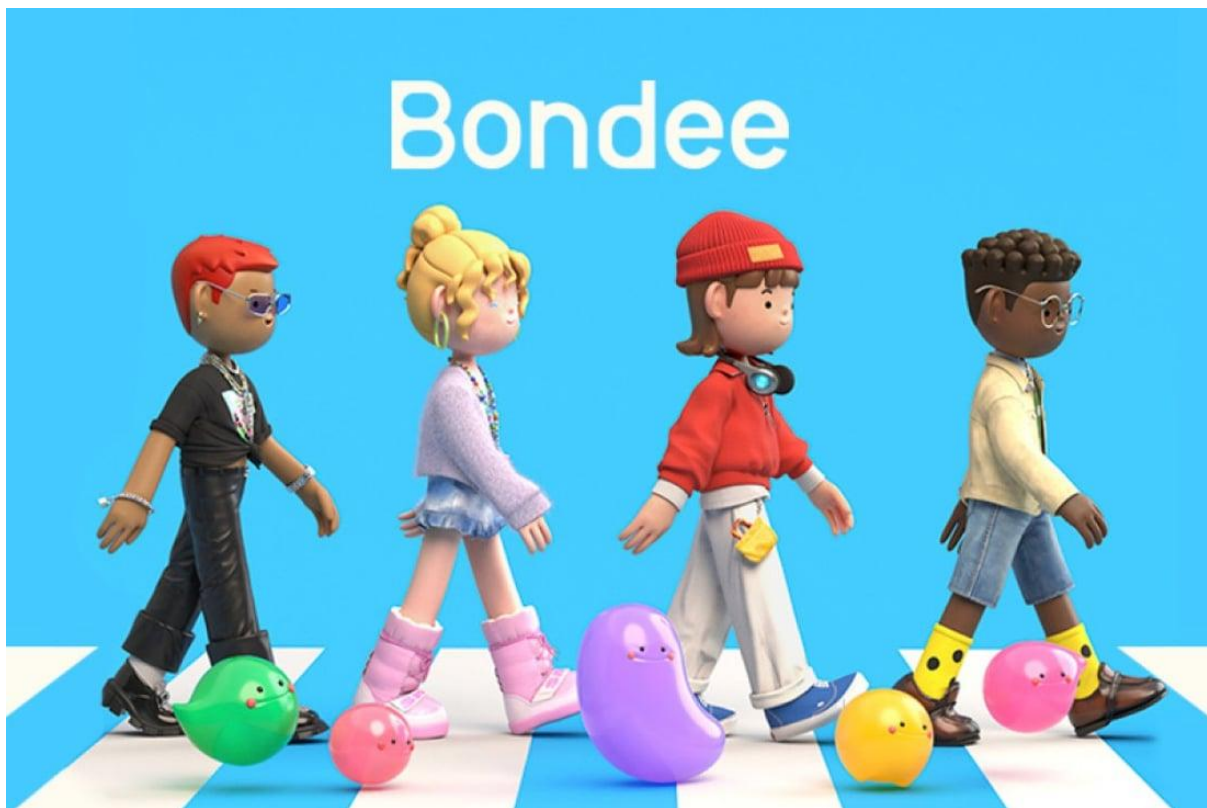


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Headline: Is it already 'game over' in the metaverse for Bondee, Singapore's avatar-based app?

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The rise of Singapore-based metaverse newcomer Bondee was impressive: two million downloads within two weeks of its launch on Apple's App Store.

But that initial hype was short-lived as Singapore's social media users quickly dropped the home-grown avatar-based app, retreating from yet another attempt by makers of the metaverse to capture the long-term loyalty of Gen Z in Southeast Asia.

Yet Bondee's moment in the sun may reveal the challenges that the region's metaverse developers face, experts say, with none so far hooking a crowd large enough to trouble social media giants, such as Meta which has ploughed billions of dollars into the digital future.

Bondee's early adopters in Singapore were initially pulled in by the "cute" avatars, personalised rooms and picnic spaces, reminiscent of games like Habbo Hotel that many millennials dabbled in as teens.

With shades of the Nintendo game Animal Crossing, which took the online world by storm during Covid lockdowns in 2020, Bondee allows users to personalise avatars and bedrooms that friends can visit.

Friends are capped at 50 by the app's Singapore-based creators Metadream, in an effort to keep the community tight, relevant and connected.

Aqil Lim, 25, said he enjoyed being able to visit his friends' virtual homes, even more as "we don't have our own homes in real life" in the expensive Asian city state.

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As word of mouth of what was dubbed the “new Gen Z app” spread quickly across Asia, many shared the QR code of their Bondee account on Instagram and Twitter, prompting friends to add them.

But the novelty quickly wore off as Bondee felt “primitive, with limited customisations and chat functions”, Lim said, adding that after a few weeks he hardly uses the app.

By Wednesday, Bondee had fallen to 19th on Singapore’s Apple Store – just a month after it topped charts across Asia.

This also comes after reports of social media users using the term #ripbondee while recording themselves uninstalling the app.

Avatars alone can’t draw people in, it’s what the entire platform allows you to do with your avatar that gives the platform its stickiness Lim Sun Sun, Singapore Management University

Bondee’s is a story of social media hype punctured by a sharp truth that the loyalty of digital natives is hard-earned, experts say, since most of their allegiances are already captured by larger platforms like TikTok and Instagram.

“Avatars alone can’t draw people in, it’s what the entire platform allows you to do with your avatar that gives the platform its stickiness,” said Lim Sun Sun, a professor of communication and technology at the Singapore Management University (SMU).

The cutesy aesthetics and whimsical feel of Bondee was a “nice hook” but if there isn’t anything else after that, then it is quite literally, “game over”, she said, adding that this will be a challenge for metaverse developers to meet.

Singaporean Joey Tan, 23, saw videos on TikTok about Bondee and became “curious about what the hype was about”.

But given the newness of the app, not many of her other friends were on it, an apparent failure to reach a “critical mass” which quickly sees new tech fizzle.

Singapore edge

Singapore’s tech start-up scene has flourished in recent years – with 11 Singapore-based start-ups attaining unicorn status, which is hitting a valuation of US\$1 billion, in 2021 alone, according to the city state’s Trade and Industry Minister.

Singapore also boasts a burgeoning reputation as an incubator of new ideas, finishing first in Asia in Startup Blink’s Global Startup Ecosystem Index 2022.

But the metaverse is the holy grail with the potential of bringing up to US\$1.4 trillion per year by 2035, according to a study by Deloitte.

Many Asian firms have been quick to dip their toes in the future of the internet. In South Korea, entertainment companies have debuted virtual idols, interactive concerts and created digital content exclusively for the metaverse.

Meanwhile, 21-year-old Kyra, an influencer from Mumbai, has racked up 216,000 Instagram followers since her debut in January 2022 and has since modelled for advertisements.

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In China, tech firm Baidu's Xirang project gives users a chance to visit a Shaolin Temple to watch a monk display his boxing techniques, before visiting archaeological sites and admiring artefacts from the Bronze Age.

It is a space of endless possibility, say experts, but take up will depend on consumer expectations and understanding of the new digital realm.

[Users] gravitate to any platform which they believe could allow them to be authentic ... be accepted and supported Tan Ern Ser, sociologist

Early adopters may want the "full shebang" such as the ability to touch and smell along with a full immersive experience, Professor Lim said, while the majority probably still have no idea what they want from the metaverse and see it as a "kind of souped up online experience" at this point. Part fad, part functionality, Bondee's remarkable initial surge reflects the nature of young communities glued to their phones.

Jeremy Sng, a lecturer from Singapore's Nanyang Technological University, whose research focuses primarily in social media, said self-expression and connection were the two aspects that "came through the strongest" from his own experience with the app.

"Autonomy and connectedness are fundamental needs for humans," he said, adding that apps like Bondee give young users, who may not have a room or house to call their own, a chance to explore and find their identity.

Young social media users will "gravitate to any platform which they believe could allow them to be authentic ... be accepted and supported," said sociologist Tan Ern Ser.

Yet like most new tech across Asia, privacy and security questions were quick to surface with Bondee, including the company's links to Chinese tech firm True.ly and allegations of credit card misuse.

Metadream quickly refuted the claims in an Instagram statement, assuring users that rumours of a data leak were false and the firm does not collect credit card information, adding a "precautionary review" had been undertaken to ensure the personal data of its users was safe.

The app makers did not reply to This Week in Asia requests for comment.

Race to own the future

Tech experts warn metaverse developers have a hard task to keep a restless crowd from migrating to the next big thing.

Platforms need to offer functions that will have people "visiting and revisiting" the app, such as Facebook's News Feed, said Lim from SMU.

In addition to privacy and different societal needs, there is an inbuilt challenge to new apps seeking to become game-changers.

Given how new the metaverse is, many will find its functions limited or jarring, said Natalie Pang, senior lecturer and deputy head at the National University of Singapore's communications and new media division.

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New tech needs to find a “use-case or purpose that will drive or motivate a critical mass to adopt”, she said. “That purpose for the critical mass is still not so clear and still being explored.”

But Pang said the Bondee phenomenon does shine a light on the possible ways ahead for metaverse makers, by connecting deeply with a smaller circle of friends, striking a chord with a Gen Z crowd increasingly “mindful” of the quality of their social media use.

For many young Singaporeans, the metaverse remains a discovery for another day.

Social media is “already doing a good job at retaining its users,” said university student Andrew Lim, 25. “There isn't much significant change or advancement pushing them to newer platforms.”