

## People &amp; Places

## Tech

## Roblox tie-up

## Gucci digitally outfits Gen-Z in 'metaverse'

MILAN, June 13, (AP) — Anyone whose virtual alter ego is wandering around the Roblox online game platform these days might run into other avatars sporting Gucci handbags, sunglasses or hats.

The digital-only items were part of a limited Gucci collection for Roblox, a step by the fashion house that prides itself on Italian craftsmanship to enter an expanding virtual space where many of its youngest admirers already are at home.

Players in the metaverse — where virtual worlds, augmented reality and the internet meet — say the big-name fashion collaboration represents a new era of virtual-real world interplay, a space in which smart product placement meets the desire of consumers to express their personalities in the virtual world.

While the Gucci Garden space on Roblox was open for two weeks last month, the platform's 42 million users could spend from \$1.20 to \$9 on collectible and limited-edition Gucci accessories. Items were hidden in the virtual Gucci Garden, which echoed real-world Gucci Garden exhibitions in Florence and other global cities. Some items were offered for free, and the exclusivity was underlined with limited time releases.

The experience allowed Roblox's core demographic — roughly ages 9 to 15 — a digital entrée to the rarified world of luxury goods that few can dream of in the real world. Now that the space is closed, the limited edition items have even greater cachet. According to the developer, more than 4.5 million items were "won."

Many parents may scratch their heads at paying real money to accessorize an avatar, but Generation Z players have long been prepped for this evolution. They ran through physical streets and parks to intercept and capture Pokemon Go characters, part of an augmented reality mobile game that launched in 2016. Many took the edge off pandemic lockdown by playing with real-world friends over gaming platforms. On Roblox, dressing up avatars is old hat.

## Valuable

"Gen Z, they sometimes see virtual products as more valuable than physical products," **Christina Wootton**, the vice president for brand partnerships at Roblox, said. "We are definitely seeing that on Roblox, where it is all about storytelling and self-expression. There are so many people who come together and social and connect with their friends, and they want to represent their digital selves through fashion."

While the Gucci items users bought only can be "worn" on the Roblox platform, it is just the tip of the metaverse iceberg.

Similar items made and traded in the metaverse are known as non-fungible tokens (NFTs) — digital objects backed by blockchain technology certifying their authenticity, and often uniqueness. NFTs, which might be anything from personalized "skins," or costumes, for avatars to digital art, can be traded ad-infinitum, potentially growing in value with each trade. Their ownership is not limited to any single platform.

Even on Roblox, which has its own marketplace where items can be traded, the Gucci Dionysus Bag with Bee was resold for over \$4,100 worth of Robux — exceeding the price of a real Gucci Dionysus bag and a huge premium of the original price of 475 Roblox, roughly \$4.75. Only 851 of the bags were available during two releases, making it the rarest piece in the collection, compared with the 2.6 million wide-brim denim hats that were snapped up.

Unlike NFTs, the astronomically priced Dionysus bag cannot be traded outside of the Roblox platform, making it seemingly a vanity investment for a superfan.

The metaverse's potential for the fashion world goes well beyond the world of gaming and extends into digital ecosystems that are still under construction. So-called decentralized worlds are seeing a huge influx of money, with billions being spent to iron out technical issues.

Boson Protocol, a technology company, is bridging the gap between the metaverse and physical world with a new venture designed to allow consumers to purchase fashion NFTs for their avatars from a platform, Decentraland. NFTs, in turn, will contain vouchers redeemable for corresponding real-world items. The project is expected to launch in two months.

## Objects

"If we increasingly are going to exist in these digital spaces, then objects that are scarce, unique and ownable, of course, are going to have value in those spaces," London-based Boson Protocol co-founder Justin Banon said. "All of these things of social signaling in the real world are just, in fact, perhaps more important in the digital world."

It's only natural that fashion would pave the way for the less digitally savvy consumers, who may shy away from Bitcoin and balk at multimillion-dollar sales of NFTs that have captured the attention of artists and collectors alike.

"Fashion brands have to go where other people are not going. The whole point of a fashion brand is to stand out," Allen Adamson, co-founder of marketing consultancy Metaforce, said.

For Gucci, the biggest return on investment from the Roblox tie-up "is to become part of that generation's world," Adamson said.

"No one shares ordinary," Adamson said. "My avatar is wearing a Gucci belt' is a little different" and perhaps even catchier for a certain audience than spotting a real Gucci bag on the street.

Gucci CEO Marco Bizzarri said that more than generating revenue, the Roblox collaboration was a way to tap fresh creative veins and stay apace of an evolving world where fashion, music, films and technology increasingly mashup.

"Who knows what the industry will look like in 10 years? We want to start before everyone else to get up to speed," Bizzarri said at the physical Gucci Garden opening in Florence. "Certainly, they are not operations that bring a lot of business now, but they could be a source of business tomorrow."

Gucci creative director Alessandro Michele described the metaverse as new "territory" to explore.

"Fashion has become more than a boutique along the street in a capital. I think we are in a phase when maybe the world wants to go beyond the industrialized revolution and doesn't know how to do it," Michele said. "Especially now, in this phase of the pandemic, it is a big chance to accelerate changes."



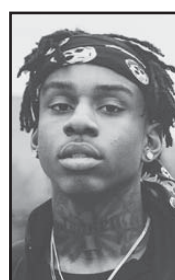
Wootton



Musician Danny Elfman poses in his studio on May 26, 2021, in Los Angeles to promote his 18-track double album 'Big Mess.' (AP)



Actor Alexandra Shipp attends a special screening of 'Asking For It' at the SVA Theatre on June 12, in New York. The film is part of the Tribeca at Home series during the 20th Tribeca Festival. (AP)



Polo G



Vega

## Variety

**MIAMI:** Rapper **Polo G** has been arrested on charges including battery on a police officer, resisting arrest with violence and criminal mischief.

Jail records show the rapper, whose name is **Taurus Bartlett**, was booked into jail early Saturday on five charges and released on bond hours later.

The Miami Police Department released arrest affidavits in which officers stated Bartlett, 22, and others were pulled over early Saturday, and the rapper ended up in a struggle on the ground with officers. One of the documents says an officer who was trying to handcuff Bartlett was struck multiple times.

The documents say Bartlett was aggressive as he resisted arrest in downtown Miami. One of the officers said he had ordered him and all the passengers in the car he was traveling in to get out of the vehicle to pat them down for firearms, saying he suspected they carried weapons because they heard a passenger claim the vehicle was bulletproof. The police department said it was reviewing the incident that would include examining all camera footage, saying the arrest was captured on several body-worn cameras. Police spokesman **Michael Vega** said it also was investigating several threats received against personnel and facilities in response to the rapper's arrest.

The **Chicago**-based artist had just released his newest album "Hall of Fame" on Friday. His single "Rapstar" debuted at No. 1 on the Billboard Hot 100 in April. His mother and manager said on Instagram that Polo G and his younger brother were riding in a car with security after an album release party.

The mother, **Stacia Mac**, posted a message on Facebook saying she had bonded out Polo G and other people who were arrested in the same traffic stop. Jail records did not list an attorney for the rapper. (AP)

**TARRYTOWN, NY:** The Westminster Kennel Club dog show finals are shaping up to be a clash of canine titans.

One is Bourbon the whippet, the prestigious show's runner-up last year and the winner of the huge American Kennel

## Music

## Elfman pens solo album with 'venom' pouring out

## 'Big Mess' is clearly a pandemic diary

NEW YORK, June 13, (AP) — When Danny Elfman started creating music during quarantine, what came out was a surprise even to him.

"When I opened my mouth to sing more venom than I ever knew that I had in me came pouring out," he said recently. "I didn't really know what I had to work with other than a lot of frustration and anger. And I think that's what needed to express itself."

The result is a sonic howl — part glam rock, part orchestral, part punk, with driving, industrial songs that are liable to disintegrate or tear off into a different direction. The title for the ambitious 18-track double album is perfect: "Big Mess." It's his first solo collection in more than 30 years.

"I was either writing really heavy or like really hyper energized, fast and kind of crazy," Elfman said. "I found myself writing personally in a way that I haven't before. And that was also surprising to me."

Grammy- and Emmy-winning Elfman, a former leader of new wave band Oingo Boingo, has for so long turned his talent to fueling film scores like "Batman," "Beetlejuice," "Big Fish," "Edward Scissorhands," "Milk," "Good Will Hunting," "Men In Black" and "Silver Linings Playbook," as well as the opening theme for "The Simpsons."

He says he had found a balance for his racing mind by alternating film projects and classical music — until lockdown. Then emerged rock. "I think a lot of us kind of found parts of ourselves that we weren't expecting."

"Big Mess" is clearly a pandemic diary, exploring isolation and alienation. Elfman samples Donald Trump in "Choose Your Side" and tackles quarantine in "Love in the Time of COVID," which has the lyrics "Living a life in a nutshell/Staying inside is a tough sell."

The album had a curious birth. Elfman had been approached in 2019 by the Dark Mof festival in Tasmania, Australia, and asked to create a crazy performance piece. He decided to combine strings and a rock band, something he calls "chamber punk."

He created a 12-minute instrumental but ran out of time to create a full hour-long set. He returned to it during lockdown and it became "Sorry," the album's first cut. Then the other songs came tumbling out.

Laura Engel, the executive producer of the album, has worked with Elfman for over 40 years, said he always likes moving forward, exploring new sonic territory and never being tied to a single genre.

## Surprise

"I learned early on that anything I do with Danny, it's never going to be linear," she said. "It's always going to surprise me and it's always going to be just a little bit more fun, more interesting and more brilliant than most anything else you could ever do."

Elfman wrote much of the album in a house outside Los Angeles, where he, his wife, Bridget Fonda, 16-year-old son, Oliver, and their dog fled to ride out the pandemic.

The house didn't have a recording studio, only a little writing room. Elfman had a computer, one handheld microphone, a single electric guitar and a pair of faulty headphones — not the best equipment for putting together a double album. But he pressed on.

He decided not to fix any of his vocals when it came time to go to the studio and invited musicians — including drummer Josh Freese, bassist Stu Brooks and guitarists Nili Brosh and Robin Finck — to record their parts, one at a time, per COVID-19 protocols. "I just kept most of my original guitars and vocals from

the demos," said Elfman.

While 17 of the 18 songs are originals, fans of Oingo Boingo will notice Elfman has reworked one of the band's old songs, "Insects" from 1982. Not surprisingly, the new one is darker and more political. He had intended it to be part of a set at Coachella and was thinking who could be the insects of today? His answer: US senators.

"These are my bloodsuckers of today. These are like the human insects," he said. So the new lyrics go: "Old white men, they're back in power again/They're sucking all the power and pride."

He laughs darkly that the dystopian America he found himself writing about in the 1980s is looking more recognizable in the 2020s. "1984" seemed a lot closer to me in 2020 than it did in 1984."

For the cover artwork, 3D scans of Elfman were transformed into a disturbing digital sculpture by Sarah Sitkin. It's an unsettling trio of Elfman's, with one painfully emerging from the head of another. The songwriter said it captures how he felt with various parts of him "living together, but aren't good roommates."

Elfman, ever the productive songwriter, has already moved on, finishing a cello concerto and working on back-to-back film scores. He's also returning to the stage with a live concert of Tim Burton's "The Nightmare Before Christmas" on Oct. 29 at the Banc of California Stadium.

He hopes to be able to play "Big Mess" live one day in some form and show off what he learned during quarantine. One thing was to ditch his regular writing for a character and just write from the heart.

"It was scary because I was like, 'This is just me. I don't have any protection here,'" he said.

Club National Championship show in December. Another is Wasabi the Pekingese, the AKC show's 2019 winner and the grandson of Westminster's 2012

best in show.

Both trotted Saturday to slots Sunday's final ring, as did Mathew, a French bulldog that happens to live with Bourbon,

and Connor, an old English sheepdog. Three more finalists will be selected Sunday night, when they all vie for best in show.

For Bourbon, the honor comes three months after having her first litter of puppies.

"She's come a long way — as a really unruly puppy, and then a really great show career, and then a mom" that doted on her five pups, said handler **Cheslie Pickett Smithey of Sugar Valley, Georgia**.

She'll be facing off in the best in show ring against her husband, **Justin Smithey**, who handles Mathew the Frenchie but is one of Bourbon's breeders. As for which dog he'll be rooting for, "when you're a competitive person, you want to win with whatever you're showing," he said.

And Mathew is in it to win it: "He thinks he's very special, and we think he is, too," Smithey said.

As for Wasabi, "he's just a fantastic dog," says handler and breeder **David Fitzpatrick of East Berlin, Pennsylvania**. "He's got the charisma and the movement and the showmanship that you want to have."

Connor, a son of the 2013 Westminster runner-up, is "a cool dog, happy — he's a goofball," says handler **Colton Johnson of Colorado Springs, Colorado**. (AP)



German actors Mark Waschke, (from left), Jule Hermann, Wanja Valentin Kube and director Ronny Trocker pose before the screening of the film 'Human Factors' in the 'Panorama' section, as part of the film festival 'Berlinale Summer Special' at the outdoor cinema in the Kreuzberg district of Berlin, Germany, June 12. (AP)