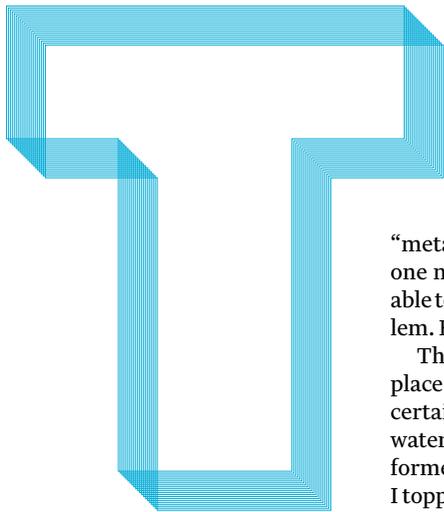


# IS LIFE A GAME WE'RE PLAYING?

Do virtual-reality games show us the promise of the metaverse? And can they be a model for life itself? *Oliver Roeder* dons his headset, settles his stomach and heads out on to the mini golf course of existence



he first thing the virtual me did was put on a sweatshirt and a baseball cap, as the real me often does. I wanted to recognise myself in the digital mirror. However, in this zealously distorted facsimile of reality, the cap's virtual brim rendered large in the centre of my headset screen, a sort of lidless cartoon boomerang blocking the view on my virgin trip to the "metaverse". Peering carefully around my own head - one navigates many menus in the "metaverse" - I was able to put the hat on backwards, which solved that problem. But others quickly replaced it.

The metaverse (I'll drop the scare quotes now) is a place where certain joys of the real world are muted and certain pains amplified. I knocked over a real glass of water trying to press a virtual button - an action I've performed many times in the real world without incident. I toppled a real table trying to take a virtual selfie. And I am evidently an acute sufferer of that ultimate modern ailment, virtual reality sickness, symptoms of which include nausea and something called "stomach awareness", the reality of which I can confirm. (The malady, closely related to motion sickness, has to do with the discrepancy between viewed motion and actual motion; inciting events include walking.) And to anticipate your question, no, I did not have legs.

I proceeded undeterred into the metaverse, with a machine strapped to my face and a bucket by my side, to play games. Games are crystallised models of the real world; they capture essential elements of living. Chess epitomises planning ahead, backgammon adapting to randomness, poker hidden information and deception. Games are also, of course, an art form. As painting captures the visual world, and music the heard world, games capture human agency - modes of deciding and acting.

For machines, games are training. Chess, backgammon and Go spurred the development of artificial intelligence - they helped hone search techniques, neural networks and deep learning. And games in virtual reality will shape the development of that technology and, perhaps, usher in and popularise a broader metaverse. To play games is to glimpse the future.

"If you can make a good game on a device, that says something about the level of maturity of the device," Chris Pruett, the director of content ecosystem at Meta, told me. "It's also a reason for people to actually use that device."

To enable me to test the theory, Meta (née Facebook) sent me a Quest 2 virtual reality system (retail price \$399) and provided me free access to all the games in its store. It's notable how much equipment one requires to approximate the real world one is preparing to leave. In my case: a hefty headset (1.1lbs) inside which a computer, LCD screen and two lenses through which to view it stereoscopically; two handheld controllers, each with joystick, two triggers and three buttons; a large silicone gasket for "improved hygiene, comfort and immersion"; and a plastic gizmo for glasses-wearers. The system tracks your head and hands, so you can look around and

manipulate certain objects. A warning on the package: "No sunlight on lenses".

I began my journey in Meta's own *Horizon Worlds*, its flagship metaversal app, a set of eye-wateringly garish common spaces, venues and playscapes, populated by the legless avatars of other real people. In my experience, and well documented in other media reports, the other real people were mostly children, and predominantly very loud children. I joined a group of them in a communal activity, or rather was bullied into it: inflating a large hot-air balloon by depressing plungers on a series of machines. We succeeded, piled in and floated high above the technicolour landscape below. So annoying was the juvenile chatter aboard that I jumped off. (I was unharmed.)

I headed next to the links, and a game called *Golf+*. Blissfully quiet here. The game of golf, it seems to me, is an apt expression of virtual reality. It is the apotheosis of three-dimensional pursuit: infinite open space, vectors and curves in the air, contours on the ground, planes and rotations in the swing. It is also expensive to play in real life and sensitive to real weather. Plus there's not a lot of rapid movement in golf, so the sickness isn't as severe. I was surprised to find myself kneeling on my living room floor to read virtual putts and leaning hard to try in vain to correct a sliced drive. A bit of the magic faded, however, when I discovered that I could hit my driver 250 yards with a flick of my wrist. Despite this, I shot an 81.

I unplugged to regain abdominal composure. First impressions: mildly amusing gimmick plus nausea. What was I missing? Why had a \$500bn company renamed itself after this? Just so I can look around?

"You can't downplay the you-can-look-around part," Pruett said. "We can convince your brain that you're somewhere else, that you've left your room and you're in a virtual space."

**The aesthetic and metaphysical questions presented** by virtual spaces have been with us for a long time. The philosopher Grant Tavinor, of Lincoln University in New Zealand, traces them back centuries, to the development of perspective techniques in painting. In Perugino's "Delivery of the Keys" (1483), for example, in the Sistine Chapel, Christ hands the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven to St Peter in front of a deep courtyard into which you could imagine yourself walking, as through a portal. And in Velázquez's "Las Meninas" (1656), the viewer is placed in the shoes of the king and queen of Spain, visible in a mirror, while they are being painted by Velázquez himself, thereby blowing the mind of the western art world.

Three-hundred and fifty years later, I hopped into a virtual game of table tennis called *Racket Fury*. As I rallied with a robot, I fought off vomitive waves. One theory of the cause of VR sickness holds that the brain thinks it's hallucinating and has therefore been poisoned. I smacked my fridge returning a serve.

Recently there have been provocative claims about the medium. The NYU philosopher David Chalmers, for example, argued in a widely discussed paper that "what

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goes on in virtual reality is truly real". And Nick Bostrom of Oxford, among others, has infamously suggested that we ourselves may be living in a simulation. But the bulk of the scholarship is less grandiose. "I don't think you'll find that there's all that much interesting to say about the so-called metaverse, to be honest," Mark Silcox, a philosopher at the University of Central Oklahoma, told me. Oh.

Silcox did send me a draft of a paper he'd written, however, about the metaphysics of VR, in which he "disarm[s] the phenomenological objection to hermeneutic fictionalism". He also points out that VR and the metaverse itself are a sort of game. "[A] provocative analogy can be drawn between the type of cognitive reorientation imposed by contemporary VR interfaces and the kind of temporary (but often quite radical) axiological reorientation that happens during gameplay."

The late philosopher Bernard Suits, in his classic *The Grasshopper*, defined a game as "the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles". The billiards player could simply pick up the ball and drop it in the pocket, but opts instead to try to do it with another ball and a funny stick. She does this because she wants to play - she has what Suits called a "lusory attitude". When we play, we reorient our position towards the world. A metaversal traveller must adopt a similar sort of attitude.

"Struggling your way through a whole match with somebody you've just met who has a bit of a sense of humour might give you a very small glimpse of the medium's long-term utopian possibilities," said Silcox, when we discussed virtual ping-pong. If that utopia is ever realised, it "will surely have as much to do with overcoming its technical limitations as with becoming the well-behaved consumers the tech industry wants us to be".

But enough table tennis for now. I'd been putting off the one VR gaming experience I knew was looming. The one true game genre of the metaverse is horror. For decades, horror game designers have valued presence. In a horror game on a flat screen, the designer strips away the status bar, the life meter, the points, the pause button. The designer urges players to put on their headphones and turn off their lights. The goal is to leave you alone with whatever evils the game will unleash, absent the comforts of home. The metaverse accomplishes all of this immediately. Virtual reality technology is a catalyst for terror. As much as I might want to look away from the horrors in front of me, I cannot, no matter which way I turn.

"The sense of perceptual self-involvement provided by VR media is ideal for conveying survival horror fictions precisely because of how it leaves the player helpless within a threatening world," Tavinor writes. "What was that sound? Are there monsters back there?! I really hope there aren't monsters back there!" Of course, it usually turns out that there are monsters back there."

While VR is ostensibly meant to open new experiences to its users, it also constrains them. Users, myself included, constantly perform (real) actions that have no (virtual) effect. I caught myself trying to wipe off the surface of my ping-pong paddle, for example, and grabbing

for a rolling golf ball that couldn't be grabbed. The trade-off is a dramaturgical one, between scenery and action.

This phenomenon is what VR researcher Dooley Murphy calls "patiency", as in the status of a patient - or the opposite of agency. He writes that "the bodily presence lent by immersive, first-person VR can foster strong bodily reactions as an indirect consequence of perceived bodily vulnerability". In virtual reality, things are done to you, and you often can't do much in return.

Alas, it was time to be scared. Meta's communications team had sent me a list of game titles, touting their sales figures. *Resident Evil 4* was on the list - it made \$2mn on its first day. It's difficult to express how little I wanted to play *Resident Evil 4*. I was already cybersick and am an acute scaredy-cat. Not only am I easily scared, but I am scared of being scared - embarrassed at how ridiculous I'll look when I jump after running into a zombie, monster, madman, etc. But if horror video games are going to colour the future, to serve as the essential expression of its media, I would endeavour to try.

Istrapped back in, a pound of headset on my 10lb skull. The virtual me now wears a leather shearing jacket, serious black gloves, a hunting knife and a 9mm semi-automatic. I have embodied special agent Leon Kennedy, on a mission to rescue the daughter of the US president who had been kidnapped by a "mysterious cult". My surly escorts drop me off in the foggy woods of "lonely and rural Europe", and then refuse to get out of the car. I hate them very much.

Darkened paths lead in two directions. I see a creepy cabin one way and a handsome bridge the other. Of course, I head towards the bridge. "Not that way," my escorts scold from the safety of the car. Crestfallen, I head towards the creepy cabin. I shoot some crows on my walk over there to test out my weapon. It seems to work well. As I near, I hear spooky moaning from within the dark cabin. I tiptoe inside and turn the corner and see a man tending his fire. I ask him if he knows the president's daughter. He goes crazy and attacks me so I shoot him twice in the head. The game's assurance that he wasn't a zombie is cold comfort.

The depth with which real me despised this nightmarish experience is testament to the power of the technology. (Pruett, for what it's worth, described this game as "not very scary".) I observed my real self kicking and even yelling at the enemies before me - nothing happened.

More yelling outside the cabin now and I get a virtual call - from my boss at the agency, I think, but I ignore it because there are more hostile rural Europeans outside, screaming in an unfamiliar language. They gallop at me with all manner of implements and I shoot them all in the head. They had to die, but I didn't enjoy killing them. I try the bridge again but someone has destroyed it and my escorts lie dead at the bottom of the cliff.

Deeper back in the woods, I find (and dismantle) some booby traps strung up in the trees. I shoot some more crows just to feel agential again but this might've been a mistake because more hostiles surround me and I (both virtual and real) spin around frantically to get a bead

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on them. They're screaming bloody murder and do not look altogether well. I pull the trigger with my right hand and load a new magazine with my left. I'm whacked with something - a spade? - and forget how to reach for my virtual healing spray. The real me is heavily perspiring. If Chalmers is right, I've now actually murdered a whole bunch of people.

More forest wandering. Then I see a woman hanging from the wall of a shed, impaled through the face with a pitchfork, and decide it's time to leave. I forgo the rest of the metaverse horror catalogue, games whose titles alone frighten me, like *Wraith: The Oblivion - Afterlife*.

Instead I opt for a miniature golf course, and a game called *Walkabout Mini Golf*. It is delightful. Clever courses are built into cliff-top aeries, Japanese gardens, space stations and what looks like Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin West, with the design touches of a master craftsman. I am happy to be a patient here. Meta-mini-golf is a potent cocktail: part physical skill, part puzzle-solving, part exploration, part knowledge accumulation. A bit like life. I join a multiplayer game where a man named Rusty Lugnut teaches me some tricks and we cheer each other on. (This is after I play with a gentleman with a purple beard and a pineapple head who tries to strike me with his ball.) I found myself exploring the metaphysical space and really thinking I was there. I think about it when I'm not there. I miss it. I miss Rusty Lugnut and BroTodd and all the fellas, and I wonder how they're getting on. It was on AstroTurf par-tuos on the top of a virtual mountain that I glimpsed whatever promise the metaverse might hold.

"Contrary to the revamped version of cyberspace discourse currently being reignited by online 'influencers' and tech 'evangelists', I reject that VR's singular destiny is to underpin a 'metaverse'; a parallel digital universe," Murphy writes. "The most interesting and innovative VR experiences available today do not simulate vast, unitary, networked, and persistent virtual worlds, but exist as discrete, spatiotemporally bounded slivers of possible places." In other words: the future is putt-putt.

Meta's Pruett adores horror, and the emotional responses it can elicit - responses that Meta hopes its grand, eponymous project will elicit, too. For Pruett, the metaverse is not a single thing or product or concept, but rather a direction - towards social interaction beyond the 2D computer screen. "We've never had a place where you could go to somebody and put your hand on the shoulder, or give them a high five, in a way that is authentic and real."

Haven't we?

There's another reason to like horror. "The release of the tension at the end of the game is quite pleasurable," Pruett said. Another enjoyable release is taking off your headset and returning to the real world.

"The long-term spatial computing thing, whatever it is, grows out of video games," Pruett said. "Video games are where all of this stuff has been proven already." **FT**

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