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MEGHAN O'GIEBLYN IDEAS NOV 13, 2023 7:00 AM

Will Life Be Better in the Metaverse?

WIRED's spiritual advice columnist on the lure of augmented reality and what may get left behind here on earth.

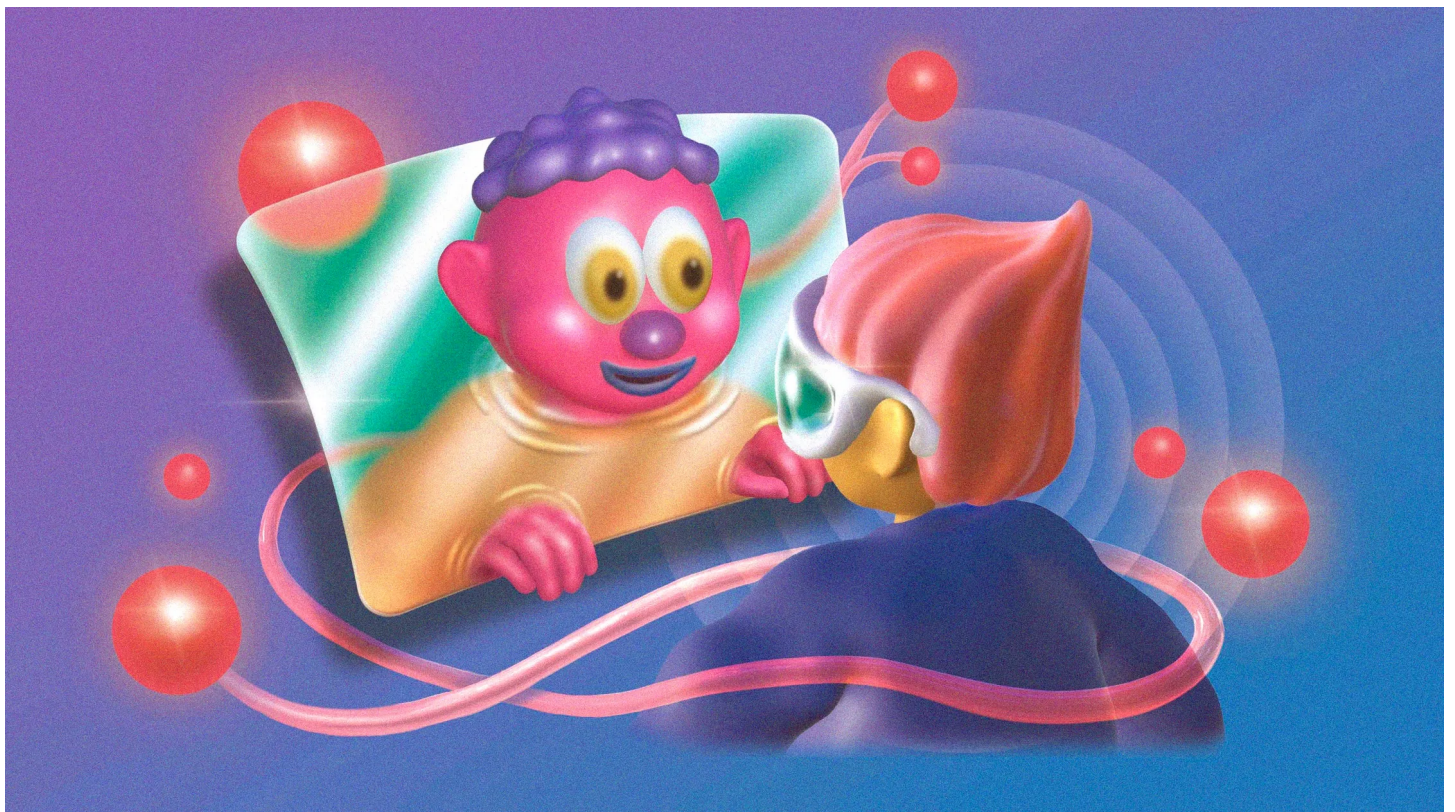


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“I **KIND OF** want to live in the metaverse. There will be all the same stuff as my regular universe—friends, work, shopping, entertainment—but it will somehow be more thrilling. When I move, will I still be myself?”

—**Virtual Horizons**

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Dear Virtual,

It’s hard to believe that only two years have passed since we were promised the new dispensation—the digital universe where, as [Mark Zuckerberg](#) put it, we would “be able to express ourselves in new, joyful, completely immersive ways.” In the [metaverse](#), brain surgeons in Scotland would operate on patients in New Zealand, and friends would gather in simulated space stations, luxurious alpine

retreats, and enchanted forests. The soaring promo video at 2021's Meta Connect suggested that the metaverse would remain untainted by the limitations of the real world—even, perhaps, the laws of physics. (One clip showed the novelist Octavia Butler saying, “There are no closed doors, no walls.”) It certainly was, as you say, thrilling. Amid the global pandemic's alternating waves of fear and monotony, I don't think anyone could have been faulted for wanting to decamp for something new. World without end, amen.

Since then, as you probably know, this dream has undergone the steady erosion of technological disenchantment. The fluid virtual bodies we were promised turned out to be boxy cartoon avatars. The Oculus headsets were awkward and, because the nondigital world is still one of doors and walls, its most enthusiastic users kept injuring themselves. Meta's Horizon Worlds platform failed to hit its user targets, and several companies that had set up shop there, including Disney and Microsoft, pulled out.

But despite the many eulogies for the metaverse, the promise has not died and the technologies seem to be improving.

At the most recent Connect, in September, Zuckerberg spoke of the metaverse as less a destination than a process, one that is well underway. The world we currently occupy is already somewhat “meta,” he stressed, because it's a blend of the physical and the digital, and the boundary between these realms will slowly blur into “this idea that we call the metaverse.” Screens will morph into headsets, physical objects will gradually be augmented by interactive holograms, and the mundane world we live in will mutate into something more glorious, almost without us noticing. Or we might already be in the metaverse? It's hard to say. The concept has become a bit vague and tautological. As one writer for The Verge put it, “whatever Meta does is the metaverse, by definition.”

If I can venture a somewhat grand comparison, Virtual, the evolution of the metaverse recalls the fate of so many religious eschatologies, which the true believers are forced to adapt and reinterpret once their prophecies fail to materialize. When Christ spoke of the glories of the kingdom of God, many of his earliest followers believed he was speaking of an imminent revolution that would transform life on earth.

Once several generations had come and gone and nothing of that sort had happened, other interpretations began to emerge. Maybe Jesus had been speaking

about the afterlife and the more ethereal promises of heaven? Maybe the kingdom was merely the steady cumulation of justice and equality that humans were tasked with bringing about?

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When I was growing up in the church, the popular evangelical interpretation was “inaugurated eschatology,” which held that the kingdom is both “now” and “not yet.” All the glories of heaven are still to come, and yet we can already experience a glimpse of them here on earth. It’s a somewhat inelegant interpretation, one that in hindsight feels like an attempt to have (quite literally) the best of both worlds: Believers can enjoy paradise in the present and also later in heaven. It’s this theological framework that comes to mind when I hear Zuckerberg go on about the physical world, AR, VR, and the porous borders between them. When he speaks about existing “mixed reality” technologies as an ontological pit stop on the road to a fully immersive virtual paradise, he sounds (to my ears, at least) an awful lot like the theologian George Eldon Ladd, who once wrote that heaven is “not only an eschatological gift belonging to the Age to Come; it is also a gift to be received in the old aeon.”

All technological aspirations are, when you get down to it, eschatological narratives. We occupants of the modern world believe implicitly that we are enmeshed in a story of progress that’s building toward a blinding transformation (the Singularity, the Omega Point, the descent of the True and Only Metaverse) that promises to radically alter reality as we know it. It’s a story that is as robust and as flexible as any religious prophecy. Any technological failure can be

reabsorbed into the narrative, becoming yet another obstacle that technology will one day overcome.

One of the most appealing aspects of the metaverse, for me, is the promise of being delivered from the digital–physical dualism mediated by screens and experiencing, once again, a more seamless relationship with “reality” (whatever that might be).

But maybe we are wrong to look so intently to the future for our salvation. Although I am no longer a believer myself, when I revisit Christ’s promises about the kingdom, I can’t help thinking that he was widely misunderstood. When the Pharisees asked him, point-blank, when the kingdom would arrive, he replied, “The kingdom of God is within you.” It’s a riddle that suggests this paradise does not belong to the future at all, but is rather an individual spiritual realm anyone can access, here and now. In his *Confessions*, Saint Augustine, sounding not unlike a Buddhist or Taoist sage, marveled at the fact that the wholeness he’d long sought in the external world was “within me the whole time.”

When you describe, Virtual, your longing to live in a digital simulation that resembles reality but is somehow better, I can’t help thinking that we have forgotten the original metaverse we already have within us—the human imagination. Reality, as we experience it, is intrinsically augmented—by our hopes and fears, our idle daydreams and our garish nightmares. This inner world, invisible and omnipresent, has given rise to all religious longings and has produced every technological and artistic wonder that has ever appeared among us. Indeed, it is the source and seed of the metaverse itself, which originated, like all inventions, as the vaporous wisp of an idea. Even now, amid the persistent, time-bound entropy of the physical world, you can access this virtual realm whenever you’d like, from anywhere in the world—no \$300 headset required. It will be precisely as thrilling as you want it to be.

Faithfully,

Cloud

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