

Is virtual reality a GAMECHANGER for inclusion?



Gaming platforms are giving us a taste of the metaverse, but can virtual reality technology help solve real world problems?

Rebecca Pardon explores

The world of gaming has escaped from the cavernous gloom of teenage bedrooms. According to a report by analytical company Newzoo, there were 3.2 billion gamers in 2022, which is about four in ten people worldwide. Each year, this number has risen by roughly 100 million. In wealthy countries, two-thirds of people play video games and almost half of those are women. The inclusivity of the gaming industry encompasses age, as well as gender, as half of people aged 55-64 have picked up the hobby. The consumer-base for gaming is growing, along with its applications; while the corners of the real world furled in during the Covid-19 pandemic, those of games like Fortnite expanded to host digital activities far beyond just conventional play.

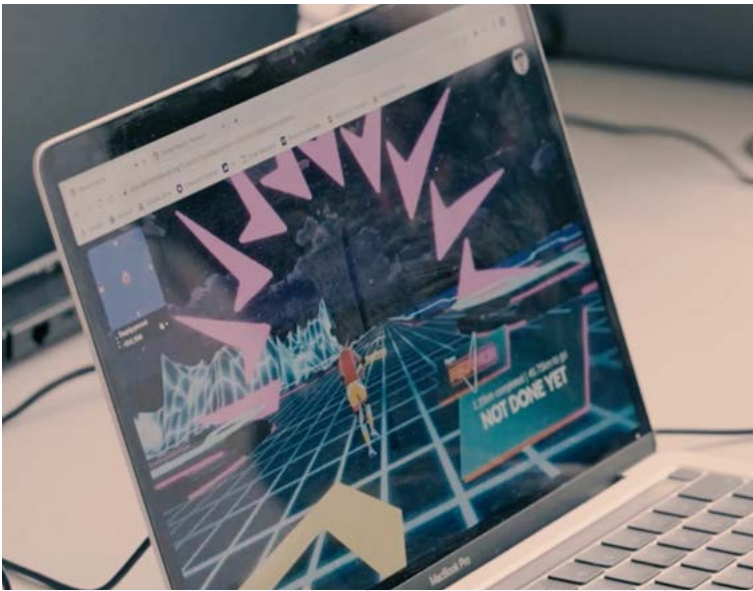
Open Inclusion is a consultancy specialising in accessibility and innovation strategies, advising clients on ways to improve their opportunities for inclusivity. Their 'Metathon' entry to Communicate's *Digital Impact Awards* last year, produced in partnership with deodorant brand Degree, is the first ever marathon to take place in the metaverse (and finished first place to snap up a Digital Impact gold award). The immersive brand experience fused the worlds of sociable, competitive sport and digital gaming to curate an inclusive environment that felt fun as well as pioneering. Taking place on digital platform Decentraland, the Metathon brought a spotlight to the need for more inclusivity in virtual reality experiences.

The Metathon's customisable avatars meant participants felt their identity – which could be represented through their beliefs, ethnicity, ability, size or age – was accurately represented in the virtual space. The event enabled those with accessibility needs to virtually run alongside rappers, such as Grammy-nominated artist Fat Joe; footballers, such as Hector Herrera; and Olympic athletes, such as para-snowboarder Amy Purdy. It also introduced the first NFT wheelchairs, prosthetic wearables and plus-sized avatars. "The experience of the Metathon was bright and vibrant; for some people, this was beautiful and exhilarating, but for others it can be quite overwhelming," says Open Inclusion founder and managing director, Christine Hemphill.

Open Inclusion's attention to its diverse userbase means a lot of care and creative detail went into making its features flexible and personable. "The platform had beautiful ways in which people could choose different visual representations of themselves which would reflect how they see themselves in the real world," Hemphill explains.

"It is a constant progression of how you can visualise yourself, so that people can see the bits and principles you want them to. We found that some people wanted to be represented very much like themselves, while some people wanted to be represented with an emu's head and a giraffe's body!"

While avid video gamers, who spend two to four hours a day on gaming sessions according to research by ExpressVPN, may be accustomed to brushing off accusations of antisocial inclinations, the Covid-19 lockdowns saw gaming platforms surprisingly become one of the precious few opportunities to get 'out of the house'. In 2020, a concert held by rapper Travis Scott was broadcast live within video game Fortnite. In January this year, Australian rapper The Kid Laroie also opted to give an 'immersive sonic experience' by performing on the platform. Beyond just being a space for entertainment, real-world gatherings also hastily moved online during the pandemic, as 'Red Dead Redemption 2' enabled those tired of Zoom ▶



calls to hold work meetings huddled around pixelated campfires. Increasingly, the digital world is providing a platform for events that have long been exclusive to physical venues, where queues, impatient jostling and innumerable accessibility barriers have long been begrudgingly endured.

Since the lifting of the final lockdown in the UK, the trend of using gaming platforms for other purposes has proven more than a passing fad. Concerts and fashion shows have continued to be staged on Roblox, as well as educational events. “I think we’re at an interesting point where we’re at a space between worlds,” says Hemphill. “We know that the old world is broken, and we know it’s no longer fit for purpose; whether that’s politically, economically, environmentally or socially.

“What has got us to this point will not take us forward in the way we would like. However, we still have yet to set up the frameworks for the future.”

When it comes to assembling those frameworks, it is easy to be swept up in metaverse-mania. According to research firm GlobalData, the word ‘metaverse’ came up over 500 times on company earning calls in the final quarter of 2021. Recently, however, the metaverse appears to have fallen out of fashion, and is instead associated with the hype for cryptocurrencies and non-fungible tokens which crashed in 2022. Instead of excitement for a new and improved world, an air of impatience plagues the Meta platform. Last month, Mark Zuckerberg announced cuts at Meta and a “year of efficiency.”

Despite the success of Open Inclusion’s Metathon campaign, Hemphill is acutely aware of its limitations and the slow pace of improvement around virtual and augmented reality (VR and AR) technology. When it is brightly suggested that VR and AR platforms could be inherently more accessible than the clunky ‘old’ world, which suddenly seems comparatively lumbered by its physicality compared to the seamless ease of virtual spaces, Hemphill rebuts: “I would say that anyone who thinks that accessibility is inevitable is very optimistic. I’m a realist, and I think there will be a lot more failure because creating accessibility is hard.” According to Hemphill, new technologies do not mean that we can slip on our headsets and leave the physical realm behind, popping back only briefly to re-charge when the battery runs low.

Instead, real inclusivity in virtual spaces can only happen following a mindset-change in the real world first. “Inclusion – the sense of belonging, of purpose and of pleasure in a space – is not only not inevitable, but it is actually impossible unless we change how we make digital interfaces, and how we make experiences today,” she says. “Because real world experiences today - whether that’s at theme parks, educational institutions, or theatres – are not inclusive. This needs to come first, otherwise you will never get that fluidity of experience.” ■