

Sexual Assault, Harassment, and Rape in Meta's Horizon Worlds

Cover Page: National Center on Sexual Exploitation's Policy on Sharing Proof

WARNING: *The material in this document may contain graphic text, blurred images, and survivor quotes that may trigger the viewer.*

Why do we post proof in the first place?

NCOSE researchers have collected this proof as evidence of the material that is made, contained, and/or distributed by the corporations and institutions NCOSE is confronting.

Proof is shared with corporate executives, shareholders, and/or board members, as well as with policymakers, law enforcement, journalists, and the public to **give witness to the sexual exploitation and abuse that is often rampant, yet sometimes hidden, on these platforms.**

Why do you blur out images, including faces, if they're publicly available?

While we believe it is important to provide ample evidence of wrong-doing to support our claims and inspire change, **we also strongly believe that no one – neither adult, nor child – should be exposed to the type of material our researchers collect:** either for their own well-being, or out of respect for those being exploited. It is for this reason we pixelate/blur/block not only nudity or sexually graphic content, but also the faces of those being exploited.

We also want to limit access to this material (unfortunately, a luxury not afforded to children and adults using many of the platforms and products made by these companies). Therefore, we add several layers before someone can access the proof, and also don't include all the proof that we have obtained. If someone feels they need to see more evidence to understand the extent of the problem or the type of exploitation that is happening, they may request it of NCOSE by writing to public@ncose.com.

Did you receive people's permission to post?

Any personal testimony shared to NCOSE directly is posted only with the affected parties approval.

For material that is publicly available, we do not seek permission to post. However, we redact names and usernames of survivors from articles, social media, etc. even when publicly available. To read more about our commitment to ethical engagement with survivors, please go [here](#). We do not redact names or usernames of exploiters who have posted publicly.

Disclaimer: *while we do collect information on those who request access to more proof, that information will only be used for our own, internal analysis. It will not be distributed, shared, or posted publicly or with outside parties.*

Although Facebook's quest toward the metaverse is not new, the concept has come to the fore of public attention with its rebranding to Meta. So too have the existing and potential harms of a rapidly expanding virtual reality (on its way to the metaverse) been elevated to a wider audience. Unfortunately, augmented reality also means that abuses that happen in the virtual world, including rape, sexual assault, and sexual harassment have the same – and sometimes even more intense – effects on the brain and body as if they occurred in the real world.

Sadly, it seems that in the development of its metaverse, Meta is following the same patterns of prioritizing profit over protection – sacrificing user wellbeing at the altar of innovation. And it is those people who are most marginalized, most vulnerable in the real world who will likely bear the brunt of the harms unleashed in the virtual world....

"Reality or Fiction?" Sexual Harassment in VR, The Proteus Effect and the phenomenology of Darth Vader – and other stories.... Medium, December 2021

Nina Jane Patel, psychotherapist, virtual reality researcher, co-founder and VP of Metaverse Research for Kabuni shares her horrific ordeal in one of Facebook/Meta's Venues...

Within 60 seconds of joining — I was verbally and sexually harassed — 3–4 male avatars, with male voices, essentially, but **virtually gang raped my avatar and took photos** — as I tried to get away they yelled — “don’t pretend you didn’t love it” and “go rub yourself off to the photo”. **A horrible experience that happened so fast and before I could even think about putting the safety barrier in place. I froze.**

It was surreal. It was a nightmare.

... Virtual reality has essentially been designed so the mind and body can't differentiate virtual/digital experiences from real. In some capacity, my physiological and psychological response was as though it happened in reality.

"The metaverse has a groping problem already" — MIT Technology Review, December 2021

According to Meta, on November 26, a beta tester reported something deeply troubling: she had been groped by a stranger on Horizon Worlds. On December 1, Meta revealed that she'd posted her experience in the Horizon Worlds beta testing group on Facebook [see what she posted below].

It's not the first time a user has been groped in VR—nor, unfortunately, will it be the last. But the incident shows that until companies work out how to protect participants, the metaverse can never be a safe place.

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According to The Verge, [the woman who was virtually groped in Horizon Worlds] post read: **"Sexual harassment is no joke on the regular internet, but being in VR adds another layer that makes the event more intense. Not only was I groped last night, but there were other people there who supported this behavior which made me feel isolated in the Plaza [the virtual environment's central gathering space]."**

In the same article, experts speak to the fact that sexual harassment in virtual reality is impactful.

"I think people should keep in mind that sexual harassment has never had to be a physical thing," says Jesse Fox, an associate professor at Ohio State University who researches the social implications of virtual reality. "It can be verbal, and yes, it can be a virtual experience as well."

Katherine Cross, who researches online harassment at the University of Washington, says that when virtual reality is immersive and real, toxic behavior that occurs in that environment is real as well. "At the end of the day, the nature of virtual-reality spaces is such that it is **designed to trick the user into thinking they are physically in a certain space**, that their every bodily action is occurring in a 3D environment," she says. "It's part of the reason why emotional reactions can be stronger in that space, and **why VR triggers the same internal nervous system and psychological responses.**"

Meta's response to the incident above as cited as such in the article:

Meta's internal review of the incident found that the beta tester should have used a tool called "Safe Zone" that's part of a suite of safety features built into Horizon Worlds. Safe Zone is a protective bubble users can activate when feeling threatened. Within it, no one can touch them, talk to them, or interact in any way until they signal that they would like the Safe Zone lifted.

Vivek Sharma, the vice president of Horizon, called the groping incident "absolutely unfortunate," telling The Verge, "That's good feedback still for us because I want to make [the blocking feature] trivially easy and findable."

It's Awkward Being a Woman in the Metaverse – Bloomberg – December, 15, 2021

Within moments, I was surprised by a deep voice in my ear, as if someone was whispering into it. "Hey. How are you?" One of the avatars had zoomed up to within inches of me, then floated away, taking me aback. A small group of male avatars began to form around me, staying silent. As I chatted with a man from Israel named Eran who was showing me how to jump (you need to figure out how to activate it via your settings), several in the surrounding crowd started holding their thumbs and forefingers out in front of them, making a frame. Digital photos of my bemused avatar appeared between their hands. One by one, they began handing the photos to me. The experience was awkward and I felt a bit like a specimen.

[Meta adds 'personal boundary' tool after virtual world harassment](#)

France24, February 2021

Facebook parent Meta began rolling out Friday a minimum distance between users' avatars in its virtual reality Horizon network after reports of harassment, one of the thorny issues for its metaverse vision. "A personal boundary prevents anyone from invading your avatar's personal space," Horizon vice president Vivek Sharma wrote.

"If someone tries to enter your personal boundary, the system will halt their forward movement as they reach the boundary," Sharma added.

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The boundary function is turned on by default, said Sharma, who added users will still be able to bump fists or give one another high-fives.

Horizon already has an anti-harassment feature that makes an avatar's hands vanish if it tries to inappropriately touch another virtual character, according to its creator.

*****NOTE: Meta's decision to implement the personal boundary is a step forward (one that likely could have been turned on by default sooner had they consulted with survivors and other experts during product development), however it still fails to prevent verbal sexual harassment, group intimidation or grooming for sexual abuse or sex trafficking.**