Is it sticky yet?

Dear Martin/supervisors/other

Instead of writing a piece that is pseudo neutral I've decided to talk to you directly. Making a stab for the situated relational approach that I'm always on about.

This is what you said the first time you stepped into immersive vr;
Whoa, it's so real! It feels like I'm in a completely different space! Wow…
You discover that you have a body, in a space. A bit like a real body in a real space…almost.

Then you looked up and down and behind you, and held up your hands in front of your face looking at them in amazement.
I know this is what you did because it's what I did, what all of us do.
This wow-effect fuels the whole VR-industry. Start ups take this wow to the bank. This wow keeps investments pouring into the steadily increasing number of platforms and applications.

Single player VR is mostly about games. It's a very natural extension of video games, First person shooters, horror games, meditative explorations and more.

I start with great enthusiasm trying them out.

After a while I notice that most of the time I pick up my VR-headset it isn't the siren call of *Super Hot or Beat Saber…*but to dust the box or move it from the top of the pile when I'm searching for other things.
What happened between *Wow!* and *dust me*?

On the transmedia circuit many producers/designers testify to the great loss of audience every time the story shifts from one plattform to another. Especially if it means a shift from a lean backwards to a lean forwards mode. Audiences seem to prefer the path of least resistance and logging into somewhere, signing up or switching a computer on is a lot of resistance. Therefore transmedia designers/producers are very good at designing their experiences to be extra sticky at such shifts. Stickiness is often other people, especially friends and if you can get the audience to look good to their friends that makes it very sticky indeed.

I see no reason to believe VR is any different. There is a lot of resistance, logging in to accounts, clearing a space, making sure all devices are updated, a lot of maintenance and waiting time. To prevent dust from gathering on these devices the content must be sticky indeed. So…other people.

Other people can be found in multiplayer games and social platforms. Social platforms like VRCHat and AltspaceVR for instance are often referred to as games even if there are no game

mechanics, it's simply that people using them are used to being gamers in game environments so they take their terminology with them.

So we create an avatar, lifelike or in some way fantastic and step into virtual worlds filled with other people's avatars. It feels familiar as they too look up, down and all around and stare at their hands. This means you've entered the Metaverse.
You've heard the buzzword and are probably a little sick of it already, building up that inner resistance thinking it's not for you…you are more of a chopping wood and growing your own herbs sort of person really. Grounded like. Not like them flighty, trend conscious people who care about virtual games and metaverses at all.

Then your friend from far away wants you to join them for karaoke/yoga/a concert…in VR. And so you pick up a duster and dive back in. Swearing about forgotten passwords, logins and embarrassing avatar choices that seem sooo yesterday. This time it is a lot more populated. Avatars whizzing around confidently without even so much a glance at their hands.

Suddenly there's people. Some very strange and some your friends. Meeting friends in the metaverse you again get that sense of rediscovering the obvious, as you did with your body in the space. This is your friend, they are present…with you in the space. Our senses of perception pick up on little things and if we've met someone in real life we often recognise them behind the avatar.

At a workshop with two colleagues one immediately recognised that other, even though that other was using my avatar.

"Is than you M? It says that you are Jo, but I recognise your bodylanguage"

Meeting in VR seems deceptively normal as you dive back in. There are a lot more populated worlds, places of games and entertainment, office spaces, and even public offices compared to your first visit. At least if you are from South Korea.

New Digital Deal

South Korea has unusually strict regulations on cryptocurrency and the speculation frenzy around blockchain created values and NFT that fuels Metaverse expansions in other countries is handled a little differently. Via the government program called Digital New Deal public funding is being poured into developing the Metaverse.
This indicates that South Korea is taking the metaverse seriously and that the government wants a certain control over what is built in there and how. By regulating currencies and having public offices represented virtuallythis is meant to make visitors to the metaverse take South Korea seriously in turn.
If other nations decide to follow suit it is likely that we in the near future will be able to apply for building permits, register marriages and interact with all sorts of public services in the Metaverse.

Of course doing this as Hedgewych6884, H3llp8ny or Chrushhhher_345 may cause some problems.

Behavior and safety

People are crazy. We all know this and people shielded by anonymity come with a little extra crazy. You only have to read comments on youtube or twitter to be aware of this. How then to work with trust and accountability?

There are lots of software solutions to this, you can have a identity certificate to prove that you are the person you say you are whilst applying for building permits or getting married and of course "ingame" there are buttons to press that allows you to mute or block people you don't want in your space, you can limit your filter bubble to "friends only" and this allows you to walk around in the same spaces as other people but you'll only be visible to your friends and they to you. Your very own happy place populated by only chosen people, no need to ever be disturbed or challenged.

If you are, like me, more interested in behavior than software then let's take a look at some of the safety tools used for larping.

Larp and especially those designed in the Nordic larp-tradition have a shared toolbox of saftey mechanics. These have borrowed heavily from other human interaction practices such as BDSM and martial arts. Safe words and tap outs are encouraged and often practised in workshops before the start of a game's runtime. Since larp is often about getting a bunch of people (who've never met before) to explore some vulnerable spaces and collaborate in building a dramatic narrative together, safety is important. This means most contemporary larps have an onboarding process allowing players to calibrate their comfort zones together.

Relational, situated experiences where all designable surfaces are used but the story happens on the inside. The internal stage means you as the player/participant are active and activated in relation to other players and to the narrative. You are situated in the center of your story. The same larp has as many such situated story centres as it has players. The characters in a larp represent only themselves, as their players decide.

When you are in a seductive VR-environment full of bright colours and fantastic avatars it's easy to think the design is what you see but I like to focus on the designable surface that is your experience.

Transferring some larp design practices to remind us in VR that we are our own situated centres in a relational storytelling co-created with other situated centres might help with creating more trust and accountability which is much needed if the metaverse is going to be as useful to us as we'd like it to be. A little reminder that we are in this together but we are not one and the same as Rosi Braidotti puts it.

Well meaning transhumanists

The architecture of VR and the metaverse is built by well meaning transhumanists. Though I have no problem with the part of transhumanism that likes to blur the border between humans and machines, I wear glasses and a chip in my left hand like a good cyborg, I do have a problem with the humanist bit. The bit that says the world is exactly as it looks like from the point of view of a western, white, straight, ablebodied (and minded) man. This idea of humanism is always happy to let The Others tag along as long as they learn to see things from this particular point of view. But doesn't really like alternatives or challenges to this position, it is a very good position, the view is nice from up there.

I've mentioned Braidotti before and I'll take the opportunity to do so again as an important voice for the kind of posthumanist critique of humanism and particularly transhumanism I'm referring too.

As we've seen with the embarrassing diversity failures of AI, resulting in women not getting bankloans at all or with worse interest than their brothers or facial recognition software failing to recognise faces of colour. This is not a question of minorities and these mistakes are not minor ones.

The same sort of errors are likely to happen in the building of the metaverse. Yes the companies have learned their diversity lesson and can show you plenty of reference groups. Avatars come in many colours and shapes. Software solutions will only take us so far though.

So much for the thinking about the state of metaverse affairs, but what about the doing_ What methods can take us forward. From posthumanism comes ideas about microaction. Turn away from broadcasting and turn towards the one on one and small group meetings.
 I\m trying to create scenarios with a *hopepunk*-attitude:
Keep the faith. Do the things you can. Identify problems, be sensitive to the pain but do not drown in it. Use it to fram and form little acts of something other than feeding the problem. Find an alternative, do different.

What's in it for the larpers?

There are obvious benefits in VR-larping over the distance immersion in a larp-fiction from the comfort of your home and your pajamas. There are some other aspects particularly interesting to larpers, the possibility to opt out of a scene is always emphazised in nordic larp and it was never easier than taking your headset off. The possibility to create environments in VR are endless but the one thing that VRlarping offers that IRL larping cannot -is of course the avatars. Larping offers many opportunities to try on different skins but player bias always leaks through and your (the player's) physical appearance will affect how your character is percieved by others, their response to your character will be coloured by it and some of it will remain through every turn of the co-creative spiral. Using an avatar as your character costume allows you the freedom to be a different shape, age, gender or species.

Adaptation always comes with its own set of problems to solve. Yes immersive VR gives you a feeling of embodiment and spatial awareness in the virtual but until the next generation of headgear facial expressions are nonexistent and movement isn't very subtle.

And if the server is disconnected or you wifi temroralrily down you are opted out by circumstance rather than your own free will. Designing your larp narrative to suit disappearing and reappearing players is one way to address this, but that too gets old.

So this is where I'm at right now. Trial, asses, try again. Trying to be a little more alive, live and larpy in the metaverse.

Thanks for listening!
/Jox
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