

Sexual harassment in the metaverse? Woman alleges rape in virtual world

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A woman in the U.K. wrote in a December Medium blog post that she was sexually harassed and raped in the virtual game Horizon Worlds developed by Meta, formerly known as Facebook.

In the post, she details watching her [avatar](#) get raped by a handful of male avatars, who took photos and sent her comments like "don't pretend you didn't love it."

The woman works as the vice president of Metaverse Research for Kabuni Ventures, an immersive technology company. Meta released Horizon Worlds to everyone 18 years and older in the United States and Canada on Dec. 9, 2021 after an invite-only beta test a year ago.

It features thousands of virtual worlds by creators and is free to download for all users, but Meta plans to monetize the game by facilitating [e-commerce](#) and advertising, according to CNBC, similar to how it profits from its social media ventures Facebook and Instagram.

Meta did not immediately respond to a request from U.S. TODAY to comment.

Meta envisions a virtual world where digital avatars connect through work, travel or entertainment using VR headsets. Zuckerberg has been bullish on the metaverse, believing it could replace the internet as we know it.

"The next platform and medium will be even more immersive and embodied internet where you're in the experience, not just looking at it, and we call this the metaverse," said Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg last month after revealing the company's rebranding.

After her initial blog post about the incident, Nina Jane Patel recounts receiving comments calling it "a pathetic cry for attention" and urging her not to pick a female avatar next time. Others have raised questions about whether getting hurt in a [virtual world](#) is truly a concern, Patel says in the post.

In response, Patel cites a peer-reviewed study conducted in 2009 and published in the journal *Communication Research* that investigates the "Proteus Effect," which found that people based their [social behavior](#) off of the attractiveness of their avatar, both on and offline.

The players that were assigned taller and more attractive avatars tended to perform better in the games and also negotiated more aggressively in person afterwards.

However, the link between violent video games and violent behavior offscreen has been called into question, with the American Psychological Association releasing a statement saying there is "insufficient evidence" of a causal relationship as of March 2020.

The topic has been widely debated and studied over the years, with some [longitudinal studies](#) showing a correlation between [violent video games](#) and signs of aggression in children and other research disputing it.

Patel points out that the metaverse is becoming increasingly immersive, and the bodily harm she experienced in her avatar shocked and offended her.

Joseph Jones, president of Bosco Legal Services, an investigation agency specializing in cyber and social media, says it's unlikely that Patel has a strong legal case for [sexual harassment](#), but he admits harassment in the metaverse is an emerging space.

He says the case would depend on several factors, such as the specific comments that people made and whether or not her avatar reveals any identifiable information, like her name. Given that she doesn't have a huge following, Jones says, it's unlikely she could sue for defamation, but could possibly file a civil restraining order to prevent it from happening again.

But even that has challenges, Jones says, due to the fact that the male avatars could be anonymous and may be hard to track down. And, it may be hard to get help on a case like this.

"With the large majority of harassment that happens online, even if it is criminally actionable, you would be hard-pressed, I would say almost impossible, to find a law enforcement agency legitimately willing to help," Jones says.

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