

Metaverse gets touch of reality at CES

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An attendee demonstrates the Owo vest, which allows users to feel physical sensations during virtual reality experiences including wind, gunfire or punching, at the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas, Nevada.

A jacket equipped with sensors that let wearers feel hugs or even punches in virtual reality was among the innovations giving the metaverse a more realistic edge at the Consumer Electronics Show.

"What is the metaverse if you can't feel it?" asked Jose Fuertes, founder of the Spain-based startup Owo, which made the jacket. "It's just avatars."

The "metaverse"—a parallel universe where human, augmented and virtual realities are supposed to merge—was a hot theme at the annual gadget extravaganza in Las Vegas, with startups showing off computers, headsets and other gear promising to enhance time spent in virtual worlds.

Owo touts its jacket as able to immerse wearers, whether in video games or in the metaverse, letting them feel "a gunshot, the wind, someone grabbing your arm and even a hug from a loved one."

The tight-fitting jacket features bands that stick to the skin, with sensors that sync to a mobile application. Before donning a virtual reality (VR) headset, the wearer can choose the intensity of each sensation.

"Our mission is to turn the virtual into reality with a second skin; to add the sense of touch in the metaverse or video games," Fuertes said as AFP tried out the jacket.

The Owo garb—to be priced less than \$450 when it hits the market late this year—brings to mind the sci-fi novel-turned-film "Ready Player One," in which people in a dystopian world live alternate lives in a virtual universe.

The science fiction future seems distant given a lack of full body suits and comfortable headsets for simulated experiences, or ubiquitous high-speed internet service to handle such rich data streams.

Nonetheless, the metaverse has become a popular topic since being endorsed by Facebook chief Mark Zuckerberg so enthusiastically that

the [technology company](#) was renamed "Meta."



Takuma Iwasa, Shiftall CEO, demonstrates the Haritora X, a full body tracking system for virtual reality, at the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas, Nevada.

Sound of inevitability?

Virtual reality has mostly been used for video games, despite its potential for experiences such as letting people visit museums, landmarks or far-off cities while sitting at home, and even for providing seats literally in the middle of feature films.

While companies such as Meta and HTC have invested heavily in [virtual reality headsets](#), the equipment is still not light and comfortable enough to wear for long periods of time.

"I'm the biggest sort of augmented and virtual reality nerd, but I don't think we are anywhere close to anything exciting happening in the metaverse," said Paddy Cosgrave, head of Web Summit in Europe.

He expects it to take more than a decade for the metaverse to become real.

"Nothing can stop it," Touchcast chief and founder Edo Segal said of the metaverse.

Touchcast showed off a platform for collaboration between companies in virtual reality, complete with ".metaverse" addresses akin to .com web addresses. But the domains will be registered on a blockchain database, instead of on servers.

"In 1999, it was hard to believe people would buy things online," Segal said.

"Look where we are today. Humanity is moving in this direction."

Industry trackers report that sales of [virtual reality](#) gear were boosted by the pandemic as people relied on the internet for games, work, learning and socializing.



An attendee tries out the Shiftall Megane X virtual reality headphones and microphone for metaverse experiences during the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas, Nevada.

'Like a cyborg'

Since the pandemic began restricting people's movements, Takuma Iwasa has taken to spending weekends on a VR platform where people chat and party in a [virtual world](#) with avatars as their proxies.

As the year 2020 neared its end, the young Japanese entrepreneur focused on ways someone's leg or torso movements can be mirrored by avatars and other ways of making visits to virtual worlds more realistic.

His startup Shiftall, a subsidiary of Panasonic, unveiled lightweight, high-resolution VR glasses at CES.

"In the future, some of the special suits like in 'Ready Player One' will contain every system," Takuma said.

"Currently, metaverse users need to use different products, like a cyborg."

Israeli start-up Wearable Devices is working on a bracelet that detects the electrical signals sent by the brain to the hand. The wearer can control synced objects with a mere snap of their fingers—a function that could prove useful if people use augmented reality glasses and need to select items displayed on the lenses.

But as the metaverse evolves, society will also need to be wary of dangers from online ills such as misinformation, harassment and losing touch with the [real world](#), some experts warned.

"Counterfeit goods are going to exist in the metaverse, as well. Counterfeit identities are going to exist in the [metaverse](#), as well," said Dan Guenther, an extended [reality](#) specialist at Accenture.

"And we've seen in many other evolutions of the internet that many times... (there) are the portions of the internet that we're uncomfortable with."

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