



Mental Health, Illusion, and Life in the Metaverse

You can't live a stable life in an illusion, yet most of us wish to.

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“[The Metaverse is] *going to accelerate the good things about social connection and potentially the harmful things.*”

—**Nick Allen**, psychologist

Because I practice both hard and soft science, *Modern Professional Magazine* asked me to write an article that addressed questions about how the metaverse will affect mental health. This piece is adapted from my answers.

The Metaverse

According to the marketing firm ICUC.Social ([2022](#)), the metaverse consists of virtual reality, augmented reality, virtual worlds, digital economies, digital personas, and virtual meeting rooms. A more succinct definition of the metaverse is a virtual forum for communication and

collaboration that transcends distance and extends imagination.

This is similar to existing alternate realities such as cinema, radio, television, live performance, and literature. What's new about the metaverse is the potential for greater immersion, a support for dialog rather than monolog, direct connection over any distance, automatic translation across languages, and the opportunity to participate and change the narrative, rather than simply following along.

Stories to be told

The metaverse is a new venue for storytelling, perhaps as revolutionary as the printing press, and more revolutionary than television or cinema. Its first attraction is for its entertainment value. Its second attraction, which depends on the first, is as a means of advertising. But its most important effect, to see it from a Biblical angle, is to reassemble the Tower of Babel, which was destroyed by an offended God for its attempt to reach the heavens.

“This technology opens an entirely new approach to the treatment of mental illness and to the maintenance of mental well-being which affects everyone. When connected to VR equipment, a person becomes immersed in an illusory experience (skydiving, walking a tight rope, climbing Mt. Everest) that feels real.”

— **Deepak Chopra et al.** ([2022](#))

This telling quote reveals the truth of the metaverse: it's fake. I have skydove, walked a tight rope, and climbed Himalayan-sized mountains and Deepak is wrong. Nothing that one can do in the metaverse comes anywhere close to the reality of these experiences.

Only inert, comfortable, visual experience can be reproduced with the present state of the art virtual reality. Only the imagination has the power to fully reproduce any illusion, and imagination can only do that when it has memories to refer to. This may change in the future, but getting farther will be difficult, expensive, and more limited in its appeal.

The metaverse currently offers an emasculated version of reality. Only where cyberspace offers interactions with real people does it have the potential to offer something beyond what we're capable of without it.

The metaverse is largely seen as a new advertising opportunity because its novelty is engaging large numbers of viewers. These viewers do not aspire to a more intense experience of reality, they're looking for more fun with less work. When it comes down to it, the metaverse is just a graphical user interface.

“Nobody knows what metaverse really means, save for it being a next step in all things digital. What happens next to the metaverse—and even if it ever becomes a recognizable thing—is anyone’s guess.”

— **Jamie Carter** ([2022](#))

Empowering minorities

We can replace the word “metaverse” with the word “cyberspace” without changing the meaning. The term cyberspace emphasizes the difference between the digital and the real world.

In cyberspace, importance is measured by engagement, and power is measured in terms of tradable resources, where resources could be votes, money, or influence. Cyberspace is deficient in human engagement.

Cyberspace offers new opportunities for presentation that will impact the balance between minorities and majorities, because active minorities will leverage new opportunities to a greater extent than inactive majorities. As a result, they can achieve greater reach, visibility, and control and, in that way, change the balance. These minorities could be social groups like undocumented immigrants, political groups like ecology activists, or small corporate players like those providing psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy.

Honesty and openness

Honesty's greatest impact is felt when all its elements are expressed, not only the acceptable or conventional attitudes. Depending on who's listening, honesty has different impacts.

Repressed ideas emerge when they can be expressed with support and without fear. These are usually “not good” feelings, but their release and consideration can be a good thing.

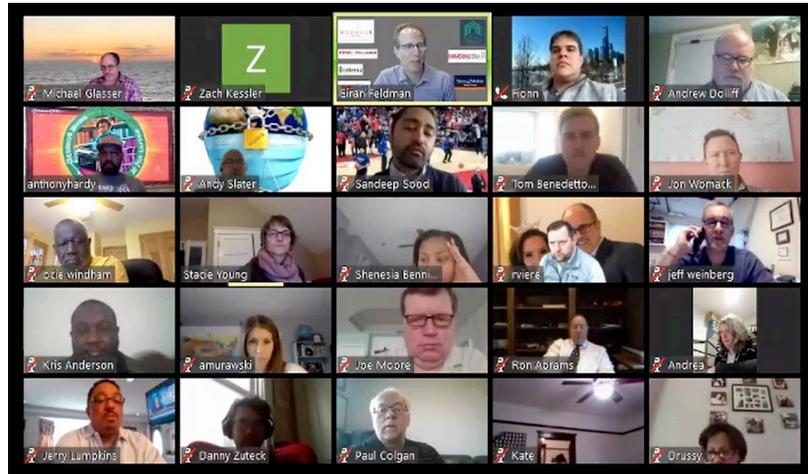
Repressed honesty is often exploitative in the sense of taking advantage of unexpected circumstances. Honest expression can be a revelation leading toward self-understanding, but is more often seen as disruptive. In this context, the metaverse can provide a platform for the expression of what's confusing, antisocial, and undeveloped.

My son and his 11-year-old friends spend hours conversing and sending each other links and pictures over Discord—a real-time chat platform—while they play their avatars in MMORPGs (Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games). Most of them behave badly by repeatedly betraying, deceiving, insulting, and indulging in behaviors adults have told them to suppress.

The most poorly behaved kid broadcasts soft-core porn to the group. It could be worse and, in other cases, it probably is. There is significant age and gender mixing, as one would expect when all of a family's children are following each other in an almost endless group event. In my son's case, his core group of seven boys range in age from 8 to 13, along with one young girl.

When these contests are contained, they have the same kind of salutary effect as a family argument. The more reasonable kids achieve alliance, while the less reasonable and more troubled kids do not. I listen, but I do not watch, and I make comments to my son only when he's offline. Most of my comments focus on where and how he should set his boundaries and how he might better respond to the challenges of others.

Because these conversations between players—often yelling matches—can be overheard by parents, they are an opportunity for parents to help their kids. I suspect many parents are not taking advantage of this window into their children's personal lives. They are missing an important opportunity.



Making connections

I have a mail list of 1,500 and another 5,000 social media "friends." I host monthly, free, open online meetings on topics in mental health, relationships, and personal growth. Those who attend appreciate these meetings and endorse the meetings to others, yet I rarely get more than four attendees and only one or two new people at each session.

I discern three types of people among those who attend my meetings:

1. Those who are comfortable and can follow the rhythm of the conversation without crowding or alienating others.
2. Those who need to express their opinions, regardless of how poorly they're communicating.
3. Those who are too hesitant to express anything at all.

Today's adults are not adept at presenting themselves publicly through virtual connections. This may be because they have not had the chance to explore and establish the kind of unsupervised boundaries that many of today's kids are learning.

It's not the medium of cyberspace that deserves credit or blame, and it's not the metaverse that's going to instruct people in the skills of virtual communication. The metaverse presents this opportunity, but people need to learn a form of communication that is both looser, demands more attention, and whose boundaries are more easily violated.

This is a human learning situation that's like group therapy—it's actually identical with group therapy. Effective communication through virtual channels is a learned skill. People who are

communication-disabled, which includes both those who don't know what to say and those who are exploitative, will have a harder time learning and a more difficult experience in cyberspace. These are just the people who need to learn these skills, and they'll need help in making and learning from their errors.

You might say that we need a new form of communication training, which schools and teachers might provide. However, I am averse to both schools and teachers, and these are the situations where institutionalized education fails ([Lynch, 2022](#)). What is needed is a form of learning that's personal and sufficiently intimate to allow fears and frustrations to be recognized and explored.

Cyber bullying

Bullying is a consequence of bad socialization, for which schools are partly responsible. Bullying is the result of schools' tradition of enforcing conformity, repressing frustration, and fragmenting community. As schools change and these traditions hopefully dissolve, this kind of prison-yard violence will be eliminated through the more active forms of community learning.

What we see now, and what jeopardizes adolescents, is the release of repressed anger in cyberspace. To deal with bullying, which I believe spans the gamut from depression to mass shootings, we need to reform schools and communities. While this runs the risk of creating small pools of extremism, it will support people as they move between communities and age groups.

The danger is greatest for people who victimize themselves. These are people who see themselves as inferior, and those for whom self-harm is redemptive. In exploitative groups, such as real or virtual gangs and cliques, these weaknesses can be fatal.

The solution is not authoritarian oversight and repression, it's individual attention and the involvement of those who care. Schools cannot provide this, but families and communities can.

Schools were initially conceived as a way to direct culture and ideology along political lines ([Cohan & Howlett, 2019](#)). The metaverse is making this school model more toxic. At the same time, the metaverse is providing the opportunity for families and communities to reclaim their role in guiding, supporting, and mentoring people on the margins and kids who are navigating the gauntlet of growing up.

Backfire in the metaverse

Socially repressive regimes are showing us how the metaverse can be used to limit information, thought, and development. At the same time, socially lenient regimes demonstrate how the neglect of standards and the misuse of authority can polarize society and create misguided factions, with dire results.

Effective use of the metaverse requires something different from what these two models are

providing. It's easy to see that the space between them is the area of personal responsibility.

What we used to see as exclusive—repression on one hand and democracy on the other—reveals little guidance for personal growth and social evolution. It's not enough to have the choice of authoritarianism versus democracy; personal responsibility and social altruism must be added. Without these, our repressed tendencies explode, and we have no wisdom keepers to say otherwise.

What the metaverse is offering us, like a forest fire that both destroys the old growth and fertilizes the soil, is a return to the old ways of learning between individuals. At the moment, it's the kids who are exploring this, largely without support or supervision.

The adults are frozen like deer in the headlights, not knowing how to act and pretending they don't need to learn. Most likely, the adults won't learn; adults rarely do. Over time, those more adept will grow into positions of leadership and, more or less naturally, the metaverse will become second nature.



Can the metaverse do harm?

Virtual worlds can be a threat to people who are isolated, subject to exploitation, and who lack support. This could involve everything from information theft to real, personal attack. But it's not the metaverse that's to blame. To employ the old slogan of gun owner's rights, "It's not the metaverse that harms people, people do" ([Johnson, 2013](#)).

While we may argue about gun control, there is little chance of restricting communication in an open society. Instead, we're seeing contests over regulating the quality of information. Claims of

fake news, misleading information, and libelous remarks broadcast over cyberspace have created the domestic spectacle of Johnny Depp versus Amber Heard, and the civil lawsuit of Alex Jones versus the parents of the victims of the Sandy Hook elementary school shooting. Infowars, the name of Alex Jones' program, is turning out to be more than a metaphor.

There is the specter of a closed society, a totalitarian state, and a gaged press. The totalitarian solution fails because preventing conflict restricts creativity and development. Totalitarian states will forever be stealing the creative insights they cannot foster for themselves. It is a lucky accident that the internet is a distributed network that cannot easily be controlled. What controls we might impose will have to come at local levels, which is just where we need it for the support and guidance of individuals.

My solution to the dangers of the metaverse is no different from the solution to the risks of growth and learning. The solution is participation, contribution, and experimentation. There are risks and risks are necessary. The object is not truth, certitude, or control, it's exploration, appreciation, and careful mistakes. As we say in science and software development, "Fail fast and fail often." (Babineaux & Krumboltz, 2013; [Khanna et al., 2016](#); [Pontefract, 2018](#)).

Is oversharing dangerous?

The anonymity of cyberspace makes more likely the harmful effects on our egos of oversights, aggressions, and indiscretions. I suspect this is why many people who don't know how to protect their boundaries hesitate to expose themselves in cyberspace.

Building trust and rapport is recognized to be critical to the success of therapy and counseling. It is generally not recognized, but is equally essential in teaching and management. The metaverse is a social forum that facilitates communication, and the impact of that communication will be determined by the quality of the information and the depth of the rapport.

People who accept without question what others present for their own benefit are at the greatest risk of being misled. As a counselor and therapist, I go to great lengths to establish rapport and I do not engage with others or encourage them to share with me until we have established rapport.

It is likely that the metaverse will both raise people's standard for the rapport they require before they share their feelings, and the rigidity of the boundaries people set in order to protect themselves. These are the lessons I'm seeing youth and adolescents learn through their hours of cyber relationships, and which adults are not.



Are illusions addictive?

This question refers to the dangers feared by those unfamiliar with and unskilled in cyberspace communication. Addiction is in the mind, not the medium. The rewards the metaverse offers for inflicting suffering without repercussion are not enough to habituate a person to this kind of behavior. The metaverse is still too unreal, and its rewards are too inadequate to provide what's known as operant conditioning, namely the training of behavior through the administration of rewards and punishments.

The rewards that cyberspace provides for bad behavior are triggers for the rewards of one's imagination. Even where the rewards for killing are real and substantial, the effect of this kind of “game” is devastating the “players” ([Chatterjee, 2015](#); [Phillipps, 2022](#)). It's the reward you imagine that satisfies, not the visual presentation of something that lacks emotional meaning.

“The horrors of war, seen up close on video screens, day in, day out, are inducing an unprecedented, long-distance version of post-traumatic stress syndrome.”

— **Pratap Chatterjee** ([2015](#))

It used to be that parents worried about violent games teaching violent behavior. Grand Theft Auto was a game that caused consternation among parents. It still does ([Arias, 2021](#); [Kain, 2013](#)). There is no doubt that this game admirably achieves all the goals it warns it's aiming for: “Intense violence, blood and gore, nudity, mature humor, strong language, strong sexual content, use of drugs and alcohol” ([Rockstar Games, 2022](#)). Yet, to see this as encouraging is to apply an out of date paradigm of behavior modeling.

Games have rules, and most game players recognize those rules as limited to the context of the game. Only an uninformed person would adopt the rules of a frustrating, challenging, and contrived simulation to one's life. The more experienced one is with the game, the less likely one

would adopt game play to real life. Statistically, we don't see a correlation between video game consumption and real-life violence.

It's not the graphic violence that's leading to bad behavior, it's the inclination to repeatedly deceive, defeat, and deface each other that destroys relationships. Games may enable this, but it's the players who decide whether to behave in this way. If the game rewards you for bad behavior, and you lose your friends because of it, that is a personal decision.

Reasonable kids who encounter violent games recognize the games as suggesting violence and dislike them. The bad behavior that some kids express is not through physical violence carried over into real life, it's personal violence to each other in their virtual world.

Will the metaverse degrade relationships?

There is no one form of cyber relationship to weigh against a real-world relationship. Online porn has little in common with online discussion groups. The rewards of gaming have little in common with the rewards of friendship.

I know several couples that met in the metaverse. Some remain happily married, while the marriages of others feel apart. All were aiming for real-world relationships, and the outcomes of their marriages were determined by their real personalities, not their avatars.

If a person escapes from real relationships through the distractions of online entertainment, then it's no different from locking yourself in your house and watching television. Don't blame the medium for personal decisions. The only thing we might blame on the metaverse is making it more likely that some people will lose social contact, but this is a fault of the culture, not the world into which they retreat.

I created a sexually inappropriate family board game as an experiment in family behavior. I think it's a great idea and a pretty good game too; no one has ever played it. You can see it on my website in the Deep Learning area. The game is titled [**Orgy of Moderation**](#).

When Air Force drone pilot Captain Kevin Larson committed suicide after killing scores of innocent people remotely, it was because of the real-life trauma of killing real people ([Phillipps, 2022](#)). Mental illness and antisocial behavior are not part of a simulation.



Protecting your mental health

At the present time, the metaverse is a collage of familiar relationships: news, advertising, game play, sales, manipulation, entertainment, remote communication, pornography, and storytelling. How one defends oneself depends on what you engage in.

- 1 - Most important is to protect your integrity, and this is a matter of establishing rapport and defining and enforcing your personal boundaries.
- 2 - Protecting one's privacy is a matter of protecting personal information, which is an exercise in protecting one's boundaries. I consider privacy to be largely an illusion and only a matter of degree. Given enough of a reason and with enough resources, no information is secure from those who want access to it. At the same time, the most serious breaches of privacy are those we enable ourselves. As many of us learned decades ago, do not say anything in private today that you do not want to appear in the headlines tomorrow.
- 3 - Vetting information should be everyone's responsibility, and this is a lesson that we're learning as victims of poor institutional behavior. The mendacity we've seen in government and health care around the issues of Covid-19 have made it clear that institutions whose directives do not serve individual interests cannot be accepted blindly. This is true especially of public institutions and private corporations that minimize the interests of individuals.

The problems of the metaverse are greatest where power and resources are greatest. These are in government and corporate sectors. If we want to protect ourselves as individuals and communities, then we need good communication skills and clear personal boundaries.

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