

Violent Crime in Cyberspace? This Is Unthinkable

Editor's note: The content of this story is disturbing in nature, containing graphic details about an alleged "virtual" assault.

A veritable Wild West, the Metaverse—a virtual reality apparatus owned by Facebook's parent company, Meta—has overnight turned into a crime scene, according to one woman who used the platform.

Nina Jane Patel, 43, revealed in a lengthy *Medium* post that she was "virtually gang raped" in the simulated world.

"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 [obscenities]," she wrote.

The entire experience, she recalled, was a "nightmare," noting it "happened so fast and before I could even think about putting the safety barrier in place."

During a separate interview with the *New York Post*, Patel, a mother living in the U.K., argued harassment incidents in the Metaverse are "a serious issue that the industry needs to come together on to put in place the correct security controls and safety measures." She told the outlet the problem will only become more pervasive as virtual reality becomes increasingly enmeshed with everyday life.

Although the alleged assault occurred in cyberspace, Patel explained in her *Medium* post it is difficult, in this day and age, to psychologically differentiate between simulated reality and flesh-and-blood existences.

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

Metaverse Response

Meta—previously known as Facebook—acknowledged in December that a then-unnamed woman had been “groped” on the virtual reality platform, Horizon Worlds.

Joe Osbourne, a spokesperson for the company, told the Post he regrets Patel endured this alleged virtual assault and noted the platform will make “improvements” to ensure users’ safety in the future.

“We’re sorry to hear this happened,” he said. “We want everyone in Horizon Venues to have a positive experience, easily find the safety tools that can help in a situation like this—and help us investigate and take action. Horizon Venues should be safe, and we are committed to building it that way. We will continue to make improvements as we learn more about how people interact in these spaces, especially when it comes to helping people report things easily and reliably.”

As for Patel, she has now dedicated herself to securing her own safety.

She created Kabuni, which brands itself as “an unimaginable immersive experience, centered around education, that takes each child safely into the Metaverse to explore, learn and grow.”

She designed the VR platform as more and more children will begin to occupy the space.

“The more damaging lens of course will be on our children who will start to use the Metaverse(s) more and more over the coming years,” said Patel. “The inevitable move into the

Metaverse now causes further concerns if not properly regulated and controlled for this impressionable age group on the back of solid research, science, data and evidence-based methodologies.”

Kabuni is designed to be a “safer Metaverse” for users ages eight to 16.

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