Why Stripe's 'Fast' Horse Is Losing the One-Click Checkout Race

READ NOW

✕

I The Information

OPINION   AR/VR   🔖   Share article
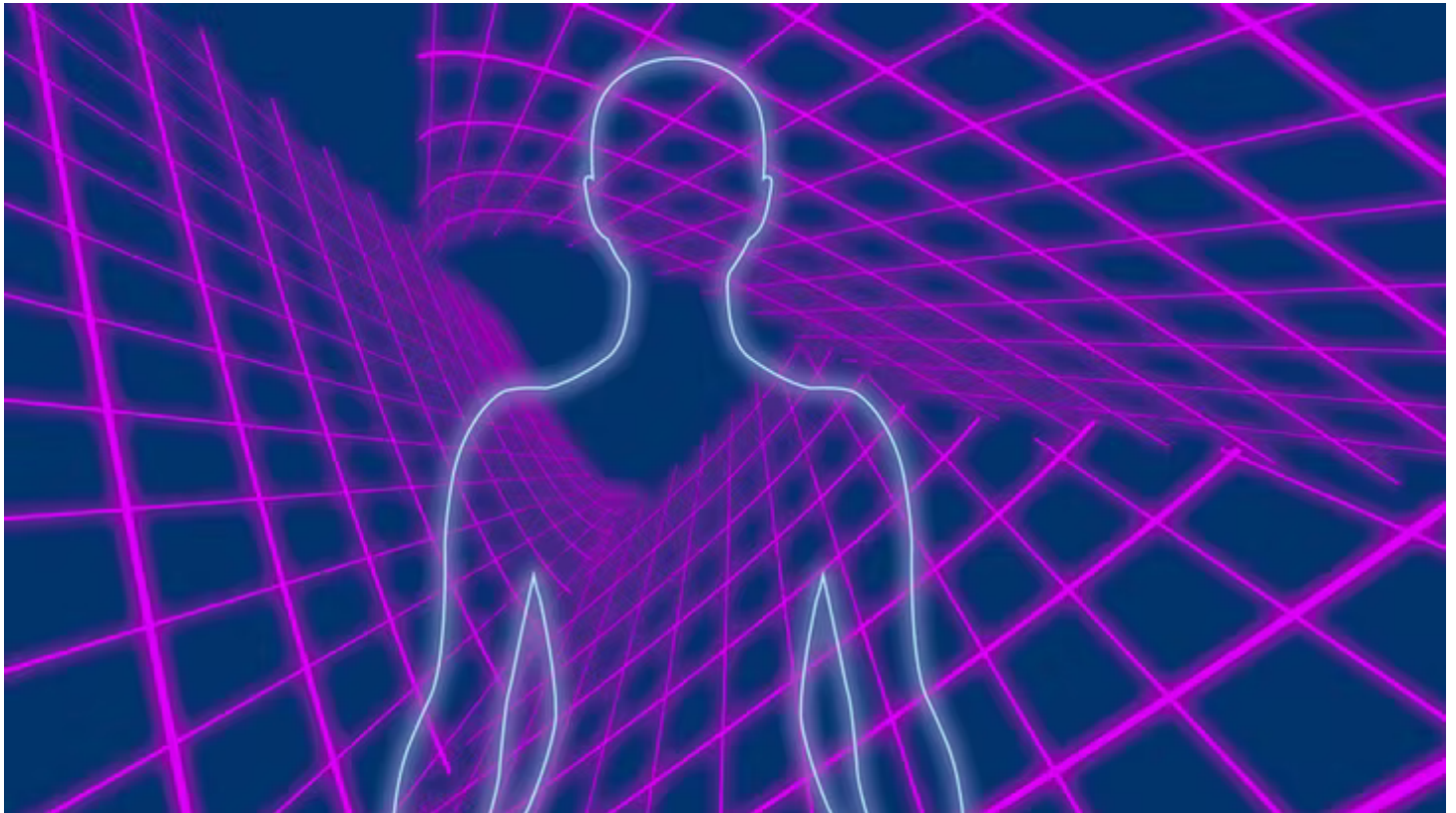
We Need a 911 for the Metaverse

Reporting harassment and abuse in virtual reality should be a reflex, not a puzzle.

By Brittan Heller
Heller is an attorney who specializes in law, technology and human rights.

March 30, 2022 9:00 AM PDT

Art by Mike Sullivan

Y ou're walking down the street when someone jumps out of the shadows, knocks you down and steals your wallet. Or maybe you're in a crowded bus and feel a stranger's hand trying to force its way inside your clothing. What do you do? In the U.S., you'd call 911 to reach the police. But what if 911 were a different number in every town or even every neighborhood? What if in some places you could reach the police by cell phone, but in others it had to be a landline or a pay phone? What if the laws were different depending on which precinct you ventured into?

This is what it's like to experience an assault in the metaverse, where the rules and the way they're enforced vary platform by platform.

Online harassment is already pervasive and destructive, and society is still ill-equipped to deal with it more than 30 years after the introduction of the consumer internet. The rise of virtual reality and the metaverse add a new dimension to this problem—but also, importantly, a new opportunity to help solve it. At a bare minimum, citizens of the metaverse deserve an industrywide standard for reporting abuse and harassment.

THE TAKEAWAY

Effective enforcement starts with effective reporting. We can't have a safe metaverse without both.

Most social VR platforms have features that allow users to report harassment and other antisocial behaviors. In Meta Platforms' Horizon Worlds, for instance, a set of safety controls appears on users' wrists—but only when they look down as though they're glancing at a watch. In Microsoft's AltspaceVR, the safety controls are always available—floating around users' feet. Those who've tried to activate some of these controls report **not being comfortable or fast enough** to access them in the moment of abuse, while well-meaning but impractical advice on how to avoid harm in VR spaces **strays dangerously close to victim-blaming.**

blaming.

This is not a user problem. It's a design problem.

Reporting safety-based emergencies should be a reflex, not an ordeal. In the same way that **flagging posts** has become commonplace on social media, standardized reporting protocols

across platforms would help users respond to abuse in ways that both minimize their own trauma and give platforms information they can use to prevent future harms. Flagging on its own is far from a perfect solution—it effectively turns users into volunteer moderators and doesn't obviate the need for more-proactive steps and transparent processes—but it is scalable and, crucially, familiar.

What it may not be, however, is a source of usable data. Other social networks have been able to leverage data from users' flags to create artificial intelligence programs that stop harassment before it starts. Twitter, for one, was able to remove **more than half** of tweets ultimately identified as abusive before users even reported them in the third quarter of 2019.

Social VR is a lot more complicated than today's social media, however. Metaverse platforms have to respond to harassment across not one but **three dimensions:** verbal, physical and environmental (say, decorating the walls of a virtual home with Nazi paraphernalia). As of now, AI can't do that sophisticated type of moderation in real time, let alone at scale, making the need for effective user-based tools that much greater.

In addition to asking for standardized reporting, users must insist on clear and concrete information about safety controls, not accept hollow assurances from companies **more concerned about growth than about user safety.** For instance, after **a couple** of **well-publicized** groping incidents in Horizon Worlds, Meta made its optional **personal boundary** feature a default setting and expanded the standard bubble from roughly 18 inches—a distance based on social science research on personal space—to four feet, a seemingly arbitrary increase.

While this new default may prevent some unwanted touching, it doesn't prevent avatars from ganging up on someone or hurling slurs from afar. What it certainly does do is make the

metaverse an awkward space to move around in. Aside from all the **technical difficulties,** Meta's post–Super Bowl Foo Fighters concert felt less like an immersive arena show and more like a stifled, socially distanced affair, according to people I talked to who managed to get in.

A month or so later, in response to "community feedback," Meta added an option to turn on the personal boundary just for "non-friends." Responding to feedback is good, but without more transparency about how complaints are handled, there's no way to tell whether the company is iterating thoughtfully or reacting frantically. So far, neither Meta nor any other platform has released **transparency reports** of the kind that have become standard for text- and image-based social media, detailing the number of complaints received and what if any enforcement actions were taken as a result.

Harassment in VR is not just a new facet of the age-old problem of online abuse; it's a phenomenon that has more in common with harassment in physical spaces than with flame wars on the internet. **Presence**—the feeling that you're really inhabiting a virtual space—is one of the key goals of VR technology. To our brains, the experiences we have in VR are **just as real** as the ones we have in the flesh. Harassment or assault in a virtual space makes us feel physically unsafe, because, based on the underlying neuroscience, we are.

None of this should take anything away from the very real harm that harassment posted to the internet can cause. As a law student, I was the target of a cyber-harassment campaign aimed at derailing my career. This was before TikTok, Snapchat or Twitter existed, when Facebook was only available at a handful of elite colleges and Reddit was still part of Y Combinator. Even without a powerful algorithm to spread the lies and abuse that were being thrown at me, the incident had profound effects on my life. I went silent in class and avoided going out in public after receiving threats of physical and sexual violence. I needed a law enforcement escort to take me to finals.

Along with another victim of harassment on the same message board, I sued my harassers, and while the suit was **settled in our favor,** the experience of having my privacy invaded and

my safety compromised fundamentally changed my world. Nobody should have to experience this type of terror.

There is still much ambiguity about the metaverse, but one thing about it is abundantly clear: We can't have a VR world where users feel safe and secure if they can't get help when they need it. To put it back in physical-world terms, would you walk down a street where

you'd once gotten mugged if nothing had been done to make it safer? Would you keep taking the bus if you got groped every time?

Simply instituting cross-platform reporting standards won't solve these problems—911 only works if the police actually show up. Rather, standardized reporting is a necessary precursor to enforcing community standards and, ultimately, realizing the best of what VR can offer.

Brittan Heller is an attorney who specializes in law, technology and human rights. She advises companies on key strategic and ethical issues related to the metaverse, VR/AR and social media. Previously, Heller was the founder of the Center for Technology and Society and worked for the International Criminal Court and the U.S. Department of Justice, prosecuting human rights violations. Heller's partner is an employee of Meta Platforms.

Subscriber Comments

Rick Lane
CEO - Iggy Ventures LLC

A very interesting idea that should be explored further.

Unlike · Reply · Report · about 2 hours ago   👍 1

Brittan Heller

Not you? Log Out

Want to edit your profile? Edit Profile

POST NEW COMMENT

ORG CHARTS   **ABOUT**   **VIDEO**   **EVENTS**

I

© 2013-2022 The Information. All Rights Reserved.

TERMS · PRIVACY · PAYMENT POLICY · HELP & SUPPORT · RSS FEED · TIPS · CAREERS