

## Your invitation to EVA London 2022, EVA INTERNATIONAL EVENING, Tuesday, 5 July 2022

### EVA and the Metaverse: art that will make us

'The Week' is an online magazine which tells you all you need to know about everything that matters. In February 2022, The Week chose David Chalmers' book Reality+ as something that really matters:

*"David Chalmers ponders what Reality+ could mean for humanity. He suggests that in the not-too-distant future, as our planet becomes increasingly ravaged and overcrowded, people will migrate more and more towards the virtual realm. ....By 'plugging in', people will be able to lead richer lives..... where they inhabit 'sprawling mansions', interact with 'breath taking nature', and spend time with people they truly love. ....Chalmers 'disappears down a few too many philosophical rabbit holes', but overall, this is a rich, scintillating work that raises profound questions about where humanity is headed."*<sup>1</sup>

Let's now turn to the book itself to find out for ourselves what it's about.<sup>2</sup> Should we believe what philosopher David Chalmers is telling us? If we do, it will have a profound and radical impact on everything that EVA (Electronic Visualisation and the Arts) aims to achieve. This will be the pivot of our discussion at the EVA INTERNATIONAL EVENING..

Central to the thesis of Reality+ is the idea that virtual realities are genuine realities. The Metaverse need not be a second class reality; it can be a first class reality. Chalmers breaks down his thesis into three parts:

- Virtual worlds are not illusions or fictions or, at least, they need not be. What happens in VR really happens. The objects we interact with in VR are real.
- Life in virtual worlds can be as good, in principle, as life outside virtual worlds. You can lead a fully meaningful life in a virtual world.
- The world we're living in could be a virtual world. Chalmers doesn't say it is, but it's a possibility he doesn't rule out.

So from this we can infer - especially from the first two parts - that VR can be much more than escapism; it can be a full blooded environment for living a genuine life in a first class virtual reality.

### What is the Metaverse?

In his 1992 novel 'Snow Crash', Neal Stephenson was the first to describe a definitive virtual reality world as the Metaverse. His virtual world is disturbingly dystopian, in many ways confirming our worst fears of where we might be heading, at a furious pace. But virtual worlds don't have to be dystopian. As with most technologies, whether VR is good or bad depends entirely on how it's used. In full-dive VR, users should be able to build their own lives as they choose, genuinely interacting with others around them and leading a meaningful and valuable life.

The Metaverse can be envisaged as a virtual world where no one spends an entire lifetime; people will be able to enter or exit as they choose. Everyone who visits the Metaverse will have been born in an ordinary physical reality and still will be based there. When they choose to, they can don a headset, and perhaps a bodysuit, and enter the world of the Metaverse - a world that users will apprehend with all their senses, as if they are physically inhabiting the environment and where no trace of the ordinary physical environment remains. **To sum up, the Metaverse can be described as a virtual world (or system of virtual worlds) in which everyone can spend time living day-to-day lives with many forms of social interaction.**

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theweek.co.uk/arts-life/culture/books/955640/reality-david-j-chalmers-book-review>

<sup>2</sup> Reality+: Virtual Worlds and the Problems of Philosophy, David J. Chalmers, Allen Lane, 2021.

## Making it happen

VR is still primitive but, already, it is possible to enter an immersive world that, in some ways, is reminiscent of physical reality. As yet, few attempts to create a Metaverse have come close to realising Chalmers' forecast of virtual worlds becoming first class realities. It's true, of course, that the use of VR for social interaction is advancing and, already, an ecosystem of Metaverses (or maybe one great big Metaverse) is beginning to take shape.

The CEO of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, describes Metaverse as an 'embodied Internet where instead of just viewing content, you are in it'. This is why he wants Facebook to become an online Metaverse - not *a* Metaverse but *the* Metaverse. He is one of the few who has at his disposal the huge sums required to make Metaverse the new Internet. He forecasts that, instead of phoning one another, in the future you'll be able to sit as a hologram on my couch or I'll be able to sit as a hologram on your couch and it'll feel like we're in the same place, even if we're in different states or hundreds of miles apart. "*I think that's really powerful*" he says.<sup>3</sup>

But remember, stepping from a social media platform into the Metaverse means a shift from moderating *content* to moderating *behaviour*. Even Facebook admits that doing the latter, at any meaningful scale, is practically impossible. It seems unlikely anyway that Facebook will want to change a business model that has served it so well – a model that, in giving scant recognition of people's privacy, serves only to remind us that none of the moral or legal questions regarding the concept of a Metaverse has been resolved. Perhaps this is seen as an advantage by those aiming to move the Metaverse into the mainstream of commercial activity.

Already, for architects, the Metaverse is no longer a fringe subject; it's been embraced by a number of established firms. "*The Metaverse is where much of the action and innovation will be happening in the coming years*"<sup>4</sup> says Patrick Schumacher (who runs Zaha Hadid's office). Unbound from constraints like buildability and construction schedules, large sums are being invested in digital land. Projected to become a trillion-dollar industry, architects are rushing towards the Metaverse as shown by new business opportunities such as 'Metaverse Architects'<sup>5</sup>. In all this action we're seeing new virtual worlds being created which, all too often, are based on the physical realities of our non-virtual world. Why?

Virtual reality, in my opinion, should not become a mirror of physical reality. The creative opportunities on offer are so huge and fundamental that only a new 'Metaverse aesthetic' will suffice. At EVA, more than anywhere else, we have the vision to seize the biggest creative opportunity the Earth has ever offered. Jim Hemsley dreamt of just such a future when, in 1990, he brought together all those who can make a new digital world under the umbrella of EVA, and now, the technology has advanced to the extent that we are on the brink of being able to realise his dream.

## What can EVA do?

EVA has already taken a few tentative steps towards a new virtual world. At a recent EVA International Session, held virtually in São Paulo, participants from all parts of the world, expressed diverse views on: *In a post-pandemic world what happens to culture? Will our cultural institutions seize new opportunities for advancement or suffer decline?* At the event, new media artists came forward with ideas that gave some initial insight into what a Metaverse might be. I've written about these in my article produced for EVA 2022. It's called: *Through the looking glass to a post-pandemic world with new media artists as our guide*.<sup>6</sup> Speaking as an architect, I don't think the creation of a

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-57942909>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.archdaily.com/980632/the-architecture-of-virtual-environments-designing-for-the-metaverse?ad\\_source=search&ad\\_source=search](https://www.archdaily.com/980632/the-architecture-of-virtual-environments-designing-for-the-metaverse?ad_source=search&ad_source=search)

<sup>5</sup> <https://metaverse-architects.com/>

<sup>6</sup> To be published in the Proceedings of EVA 2022 and online at <https://www.scienceopen.com>

plethora of Metaverses should be left to architects although, in their role as highly-qualified new media artists, they can be expected to play a crucial part.

Of all the projects presented at São Paulo<sup>7</sup>, I was impressed, in particular, by Fion Gunn's digital project *'Boundless Worlds in Flux'*<sup>8</sup> where visitors experience the interconnected worlds of artists in an interactive prototype for our online Metaverse. She says it's like dropping into a museum or public gallery to celebrate the exciting and positive aspects of change and flux. It's a complex and cyclical rollercoaster of images and sounds, which allow visitors to change pathways, and make stops to hear a story, read a poem, or watch a short film, all embedded in a virtual world. Is this, perhaps, a project that is inching towards a new 'Metaverse aesthetic'? There were others, too, which caused Ernest Edmunds to comment: *"What we are beginning to see is a great opportunity for all of us in the new media world because all of a sudden, we're being noticed"*.

The aim of this year's EVA INTERNATIONAL EVENING (part of EVA London, Hybrid Mode, 4-8 July 2022, 5-Day Conference<sup>9</sup>) is to take the conversation further by bringing together EVAs from around the world to face the biggest challenge of our times. The subject is no longer 'art that made us' but, more, 'art that will make us'. Of the many topics that need to be addressed, these are just a few preliminary suggestions:

**From its beginning, EVA has been concerned in making a new digital world. How, then, should EVAs worldwide face up to the challenges of the Metaverse?**

**Has EVA got something special to offer (ie. due to its far-flung international membership embracing the creative industries, academia and science)?**

**If so, how should EVAs' efforts be coordinated?**

**Can we perceive the beginnings of an EVA Metaverse?**

**Do we agree that the development of a 'Metaverse aesthetic' is of crucial concern and that EVA is well placed to define it?**

You may want to raise other questions on **Tuesday, 5<sup>th</sup> July, 17.30 – 19.30pm (BST)**, about 'EVA and the Metaverse: art that will make us'. You can check out your local time at <https://www.timeanddate.com/worldclock/converter.html>

Please register for this **free event** at <https://eva050722.eventbrite.co.uk> as soon as possible to ensure that you receive links and notifications enabling you to attend either virtually or in person at BCS, The Chartered Institute for IT, 25 Cophall Avenue, London EC2R 7BP. This is an address located in the heart of the City of London.

I can hardly wait to hear what you have to say on a subject of crucial interest to all of us.

Terry Trickett, EVA International Liaison, May 2022.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5pedkFqsIIg>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.worldsinflux.com/fion-gunn.html>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.eva-london.org/eva-london-2022/>