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Exploring VR Meetings

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Summary

- VR headsets could revolutionize professional meetings, causing a shift from traditional video calls to immersive, 3D interactions.
- Early adoption can spark curiosity, and even foster deeper engagement, making virtual discussions impactful and meaningful.
- Integrating VR into professional settings requires careful consideration, with a focus on assessing both risks and benefits, to ensure that this technology supports and enhances the role of legal professionals as counselors.

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A bevy of cool new virtual reality (VR) headsets are entering the market, causing us all to rethink our metaverse expectations. Gone are the days of clunky, motion-based “experiences” that caused users to reel from nausea. Headset manufacturers have focused diligently on user feedback, and the resulting hardware is finally catching up to our expectations. With dropping prices, low latency, high resolution and friendly interfaces driving adoption, we shouldn’t expect a slowdown. And, Apple’s February introduction of the Apple Vision Pro (AVP), has a lot of people excited for what’s next.

Use cases for VR headsets are expanding every day, with powerful business and productivity applications being introduced to a user base that has been clamoring for just such tools. Immersive access to familiar Microsoft 365 apps like Teams, Word, Excel, Copilot and Outlook signals a shift from gaming to serious business use. There are VR applications for web browsing, project management, meditation and mindfulness, generative artificial intelligence assistants, travel, you name it! And standing out from the lineup of all these sparkling new capabilities, is the potential for giant leaps forward in how we conduct our virtual meetings.

In-person communication is a vital part of business success. It fosters a sense of connection and enhances collaborative efforts, critical factors in an increasingly remote and hybrid workforce. The tangible presence that we feel during physical meetings improves understanding and collaboration, aspects that can be diminished in virtual meetings. This is why there's a demand for remote meeting tools that replicate and even enrich real-world interactions. The integration of enterprise-oriented productivity and meeting tools into the VR space is timely, and perhaps even essential. We should expect rapid corporate adoption of these tools as they become more available within secure enterprise environments.

Eager to explore the capabilities of my shiny new Apple headset, I set forth on a quest to attend as many video meetings as possible from the Vision Pro. But what perils lie ahead? Are avatars professional enough for serious business meetings? How will colleagues react? Is the corporate world ready to embrace a blend of reality and virtuality? It’s certainly an exciting time to be a lawyer, geographical barriers are crumbling, and we may be entering an era of virtual meetings that transcend traditional limitations.

Creating a Persona

I had experience in preparing for VR meetings using other headsets. But this was something different. Typically, avatars are built by making selections from a menu of individual features, with the resulting cartoon-like figure only roughly resembling the user. But this time, the Vision Pro would guide me through a photo capture of my face and hands. Using the headset’s external cameras and advanced algorithms, the end goal was a hyper-real likeness based on my actual features.

The Apple persona tool is still in beta for AVP users. Once generated, it serves as a real-time representation of a user’s face, expressions and gestures, replacing traditional live video feed during video meetings. Setting up my persona was simple and straightforward, guided by voice commands and visual cues from the headset itself. There is some real-world prep involved in performing a good capture; the kind of preparation you’d expect to do when having a professional photo taken. The lighting should be good, the background simple, the headset

held steadily at eye level as the device captures every angle of your face and hands.

Despite being straightforward, persona setup did not go perfectly the first time. It took three tries to get a capture that I was satisfied with. The first few didn't look like me, and I learned that subtle makeup and hair vanish into homogeneity, while more dramatic styling is rendered as rather subdued. With my persona finely tuned, I was ready to step into digital meeting spaces in a brand-new way.

Choosing the Right Meetings

I had a few concerns, and even some fears. Would this new medium be too much of a distraction? Would my colleagues be accepting of interacting with me in this new format? Would they think me unprofessional for showing up to video meetings as a virtual representation of myself?

With these things in mind, I focused on friendly, low-risk meetings that wouldn't be harmed by a little distraction. And I singled out a few cautiously selected colleagues, people living on the cutting, if not the bleeding, edge of emerging technology. I approached them beforehand, to ask if it was OK. And to be honest, I was trying to game the system. I wanted these first meetings to be with people who shared my enthusiasm, hoping that fun and productive experiences would follow naturally.

I decided to impose upon a few people from the leadership team at Women in eDiscovery, a nonprofit organization that I'm involved in. Their openness to innovative tools made them ideal participants, as did our shared mission of women empowering women in the legal tech space. I engaged a group of fellow speakers, preparing for the University of Florida's Levin College of Law e-discovery conference. They were gracious enough to indulge my request during a few of our panel planning sessions. I was lucky enough to be introduced to a few people in the legal industry who are brilliant VR afficionados, eager to test out their own Vision Pro headsets. And finally, I sprinkled in a few encouraging friends, for good measure.

Now there were just the technical considerations to contend with. I settled on three well-known applications, common to attorneys: Teams, Zoom and Google Meet. Downloading, logging into and testing the meeting apps was as straightforward as downloading a new app on your iPhone.

Crossing the Uncanny Valley

Joining Traditional Video Meetings as a Persona

The uncanny valley is the sense of unease that we can feel when interacting with something that seems nearly human. The term was coined by Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori in 1970. He *predicted that responses to a humanlike robot would shift from empathy to revulsion as it approached, but failed to attain, a perfectly realistic appearance. This descent into eeriness is well documented in literature and entertainment and is sometimes* experienced when people encounter hyper-real avatars. Though they may closely mimic human appearance and movements, they aren't quite perfect enough––or maybe they're a little too perfect. It can be unsettling. And this is what I was asking my colleagues to set aside for the day.

I arrived at each meeting a few minutes early, to take advantage of early bird chatter. There were oohs and ahs as people joined and remembered my note about trying something new. And then came the questions––that's legal professionals for you. One of the first and most frequent questions was: Why do you look so ghostly? The persona wasn't fooling anyone into thinking that I was really on camera. Instead, it was striking a fine balance between clear artificiality and realistic expression tracking. People could see my reactions and movements in real time, but this digital representation clearly wasn't me. Most importantly, no one seemed uncomfortable or hesitant to interact.

After questions and explanations, the meetings progressed quite normally. From my, albeit biased, perspective, we were at least as productive as usual. The novelty even engaged us, in some instances, sparking discussions about emerging tech risks in relation to the topics we had gathered to meet about. From technical musings to privacy implications, these discussions were rich and meaningful. And

when I asked meeting participants for their feedback, everyone responded quite positively, even agreeing to let me capture a few images of them directly from my view through the headset.

The most important thing about virtual meetings, the entire reason we have them, is to connect impactfully. Maybe my colleagues were just being polite. In less carefully chosen cohorts, perhaps I'd find people who felt uncomfortable or unsettled. As my confidence in the medium grew, I began meeting from the headset with more frequency, and with broader groups of people, and reactions have continued to be positive.

I was interested to find that as I grew more accustomed to the headset, the novelty wore off for my colleagues, and my virtual presence became a normal part of our interactions. Today, I find myself preferring to attend most virtual meetings from the headset.

Sharing Space

By far the coolest meeting experiences I have participated in have been with fellow Vision Pro users from the legal tech space. We meet up periodically to test out the tech; discuss the legal, privacy and compliance implications; and explore together.

The first time we held a Facetime meeting, our personas were trapped in little floating boxes, just like the Zoom, Teams and Google Meetups I had tried. Though, there were some cool features that were unavailable in traditional video meeting apps: sharing screens, watching entertainment together and checking out everyone's real-life view from the feed of their external headset cameras. Otherwise, it felt a lot like the traditional two-dimensional video meetings we were all accustomed to.

But, Apple's April update, which also included mobile device management, came with spatial persona support––a new feature that frees personas from their two-dimensional boxes, bringing avatars together in a shared liminal space. Each user can see their own real-life environment, with the personas of other meeting participants arranged around their space. Instead of being squares in a Brady

Bunch window, our personas were rendered three dimensionally in our offices and living rooms!

This feature leverages spatial audio and allows participants to move around, interact, collaborate and even make eye contact. People in the meeting who don't engage with the spatial feature or aren't using a headset stay in a tile but can still participate. Several apps work with spatial Persona, including Apple Music, Apple TV, Freeform and Game Room. Though some of us have never met in person; it feels like we're in a room together, like we can almost shake hands. And that's not hyperbole, some users are reporting the experience of phantom touch––the phenomena of feeling sensation without haptics or true physical touch.

A Brave New Meeting

Whether you find it cool or creepy, avatars and personas may soon be more commonplace in your video meetings. Headset prices are dropping, and form factors are getting sleeker. New competitors enter the market every day, and application offerings will only improve. With the popularity of digital representations positioned to grow, attorneys can't afford to be behind the eight ball when it comes to understanding this tech.

There will be unique challenges in professions like law, where establishing trust and empathy is paramount. These tools are only useful when they enhance human connection, rather than detract from it. We will need to depend on thoughtful innovation, with special consideration for how our brains perceive and process the almost-human. We must proactively explore the risks and benefits of all new collaboration technology, particularly when it is poised to change the way our clients do business, and the way we practice law.

But be warned, though my experiences were overwhelmingly positive, formal meetings are not the right place to try out this medium for the first time. It's imperative to assess whether personas and avatars are professional enough for your meeting, and I am in no way encouraging anyone to push standards of professionality or decorum. I do encourage you to be transparent with other

meeting participants, as you explore. Give them the option to say no, and let people choose whether this is a medium that they and their organization are ready to accept. And if you’re surprised by the presence of a digital representation in your meeting, remember that your human colleague is still a human, and they are probably worried about whether you’ll accept them, today.

As XR proliferates into our professional lives, we need to direct our attention toward privacy, security, compliance and responsible adoption. If we implement technology thoughtfully, we can prevent risks from manifesting as consequences. And as always, we must strive in our journey to remain technologically competent, performing the research and work necessary to serve as competent counselors.

The verdict? It was fun! It was enlightening. It offered a glimpse into how virtual meetings might evolve to mimic—and exceed—real-life interactions. The metaverse isn't dead, web3 is just waking up, and I for one can't wait to experience it all! Join me in being curious about technology, what's possible and where we're headed next.

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