Space, Text and Hoopla: Constructing Typographic Playgrounds in the Metaverse

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ABSTRACT

This text attempts to delve into the creation of textual content as well as its visualization through typographic design mechanisms inside three dimensional virtual worlds known as the metaverse, with a particular focus upon the way in which such virtually three dimensional environments may place the usage of text within a context that stands in contradiction to its traditional one by creating an unexpected novel purpose: This takes a marked departure from the intrinsic attribute with which text has inherently been associated – namely the attribute of legibility. In such environments readability can be displaced through the usage of text and typography as playful devices that may manifest as visual structures the contents of which are meant to be understood through means other than reading – as it is understood in the traditional sense of the word. Instead, such spaces are aimed to bring about about states of heightened engagement, wonder and ‘play’ through their manipulation or indeed simply by being immersed within the typographic conglomeration that constitutes their essences. This subject will be explored through the discussion of three such typographic playgrounds that the author has created in the metaverse; as well as through their visual documentation undertaken through numerous images/screenshots that are placed throughout this text.

Keywords: Aleatoric, Asemic, Deconstruction, Fun, Legibility, Metaverse, Play, Text, Three Dimensional (3D), Typography, Virtual Worlds

INTRODUCTION

Metaverse are three dimensional, collective, online virtual worlds in which (unlike their gaming counterparts) all content is user-created. A further name by which these worlds can appropriately be called is the term ‘builders’ worlds’, since an important attribute of these spaces is that not only is their content user-defined and created, but also the purpose of residing in these worlds is entirely up to and decided upon by their users, since the developers of these platforms provide no narrative that is to be followed, and there are no system defined goals or quests. Instead, metaverse residents are expected to formulate the raison d’être for their virtual sojourn out of a self-motivated inquiry (Boellstorff, 2008). From this it may follow that one of the most widely embraced reasons to stay in the metaverse is to be creatively active: These worlds possess attributes that are grounded in creative endeavor to the point where the best developed of them to date, namely Second Life®, has been defined as “a wildly provocative experiment in user generated content.” (Cervieri, 2007)

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Creative activity stands center stage from the onset, from the moment that metaverse land has been appropriated; initiating itself through the very shaping of the virtual geography, upon which virtual architecture is then built, and that can be traversed with many different kinds of vehicles, ranging from wildly imaginative space craft to realistic replicas of Real Life carriers, such as cars, helicopters and sea craft, that realize their functions through the scripts that are placed inside them. Most noteworthy however is the stunningly rich proliferation of design artifacts running the gamut from body parts such as skins, shapes, and hairstyles to clothing and apparel, with which the metaverse avatars that frolic upon these artificial geographies are adorned.

An important note at this juncture is that all of these artifacts as well as the geography on which they are placed are essentially the constituent elements of an elaborate system of ‘play,’ that has been remarked upon and discussed by Brown and Bell, who researched play and sociability in online virtual worlds through an in-depth examination of ‘There,’ a collaborative online virtual world that can be seen as the partial precursor of the concept of the metaverse. Their findings point at strong ties between sociability, objects and play states; saying that play and sociability rely upon a number of interactional ‘building blocks’ for their satisfactory fruition. While talk, topic and identity all work together to make ‘play’ possible, an equally essential element is the interaction that comes about through objects. (Brown & Bell, 2006) Such objects can manifest in many forms and address many different needs and typographic objects should certainly be counted amongst them.

What is startling is that within the vast conglomeration of ‘play’ objects that the metaverse has on offer, type is rarely, if ever, used for ‘play’ purposes. Instead, typography is mostly used as a part of the virtual architecture, as signage or as logotypes for stores and institutions – ergo, not as play artifact but rather as an informational system. Another widely spread usage of text and type is in product packages and display systems. Art works that are based upon typography or in which typography and text have been used as prominent elements, are relatively rare occurrences, the usage of text being mostly limited to informational content in these as well. Thus, it appears that in the metaverse text and typography are predominantly used as instructive devices, much akin to their counterparts in the physical world.

As a graphic designer I have always had a particularly strong affinity to text and typography. It was therefore a foregone conclusion that I would carry my fascination with this subject into my creative explorations in virtual 3D as well, where it has disclosed itself through several art projects in which text and typography have been used at center stage, as the main protagonists – albeit, embedded into an altogether different format than their intrinsic one as informational devices. The following is an expose of the challenges that I faced, and the means and conceptualizations through which I placed text and typography within a context of ‘play’ in the metaverse.

Virtual 3D and Text

A usage of typography for artistic purposes in virtual 3D has its precedents in artworks such as Jeffrey Shaw’s ‘Legible City’ from 1989 (Penny, 1996), in which the work was accessed through a stationary bicycle that was physically placed inside a virtual reality environment; and by riding of which the viewer could navigate a city constructed out of type. Further examples of art projects in which the textual component have been made prominent in virtual 3D are also works such as ‘Screen: Bodily Interaction with Text in Immersive VR’ by Carroll and associates from 2003 (Carroll et al., 2003), or ‘Cave Writing’ by Sascha Becker and co-authors (Becker et al., 2005). The commonality between all of these works is that immersion is achieved through the corporeal body of the viewer who is directly placed inside a physical virtual reality environment such as a CA VE, or other such hardware systems which enable perception that is simulated to very close resemble Real Life interaction with tangible objects.
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