

WEEKEND  
EDITION  
BEST OF THE NEWS  
FROM ABROAD



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Emma Freud rocking her own reality.

TECH LAB

## Oculosis

Our gadget columnist tests the unreal allure of virtual  
reality

BY EMMA FREUD

READING TIME: 1 MINUTE

This May's launch of Oculus Quest is the virtual-reality moment we've all been dreading—there are no more available excuses for avoiding V.R. Quest is wireless, and therefore easier to use than Oculus Rift S—both are available through the V.R.-gaming company bought by Mark Zuckerberg in 2014 for around \$3 billion. With this more accessible model now available on Amazon for about the same price as an Apple Watch, it's going to be everywhere: resistance is sadly no longer an option.

Entering the world of “the Quest” starts with a mandatory practice session to master the idiosyncratic controls. Despite an allergy to instruction manuals, as an obedient columnist I took this one on the chin, and so—albeit reluctantly—on your behalf I entered the bedroom of my teenage son.

With a visor over my eyes and a control stick in each hand, I was taught by a series of captions how to pick up the various neon-bright holograms of bricks and batons, which floated around the magical darkened chamber in front of me. I don't want to brag, but, Reader, I mastered it like a boss.

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At that self-congratulatory moment there appeared in front of me a small, long-limbed stick person, gesticulating incomprehensibly. Music started and rather unexpectedly the little alien shimmied; out of politeness I shimmied back. He jigged; I jigged. He step-ball-changed; I joined in. I realized we were actually dancing, and here is the shocking part: at *no point* did he either cringe or say, “Oh my God, stop doing that. It's embarrassing, Mum.” This abnormal lack of criticism was deeply liberating. The tables turned—I twerked; he twerked. I flossed; he flossed, and continued to copy my every awful mum move. It was the most successful dancing session of my life—this tiny little creature seemed to have a strong conviction that I was the greatest dancer since Uma Thurman won the dance competition in *Pulp Fiction*.

In a final ecstatic exchange, I twirled him around the room, and the happiness I felt was entirely inappropriate to the technological nature of the experience. The music ended, and in a heartbeat my supportive, empathetic, new best friend vanished. I was genuinely bereft.

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“You’ve completed the tutorial,” said an agonized voice in the darkness. It was my son, who had been hiding under his duvet during the disco. “Now you can play a game. Choices are ... battling zombies, Tai Chi, or learning demonic exorcisms.”

“None of the above—anything else?”

“Fishing?”

“I’m ready ... ”

And at the click of a button, I was standing in an animated forest, gazing at a tranquil lake surrounded by azure skies and verdant mountains. To my right were three parrots perched on a branch dangling over the water. I waved at them, and they nodded back politely. To my left was a hamper with a flask of coffee and a snack. I sat on a surprisingly comfy fishing stool (it turned out later to be my own armchair) and a rod appeared. I’ve never fished in my life, but I grasped it, cast off like a seasoned pro, and settled back in my new world.



Birds sang, trees swayed, the parrots nodded again—and my mind drifted to a calmer place. Minutes later, deep in a reverie, I felt a bite, slowly reeled in a glistening rainbow fish. I whispered my appreciation to the fish, threw it back into the sparkling lake, then cast off again.

I must have stayed there for 15 minutes, though it could have been a couple of hours ... and I don't know that I have felt such peace and serenity in years. This world moved at its own majestic pace, knew no Brexit, had no eco-crisis, and Donald Trump had never been born. It was like living in *The Lion King* before Mufasa died ... sunny, pre-global-warming skies ... lush, unravaged rain forests ... and all the birds in the eco-sphere tweeting in harmony.

Research into the long-term physical, psychological, social, or developmental effects of V.R. is in its early stages. A company called YouVisit, specializing in the production of virtual-reality tours and experiential content, found that 13 percent of people who try a holiday in V.R. go on to book the trip or seek more information—and there's been a 190 percent increase in one company's New York-excursion bookings since it was promoted on V.R. headsets. But there's a growing concern that this technology may alter the brain in ways that are not yet fully understood. I feel I'm in a stronger position now to contribute to this debate: the problem with virtual reality doesn't lie in the virtual world; it's what happens when you come back ...

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As I took the visor off and looked around the teenage bedroom—at the heavy-metal posters on the wall, the muggy cloud of smog outside, challenged by the odor of an overflowing laundry basket—my heart sank, my spirits tanked, and the realities of the day bit me in the face. It was stark. I didn't want to live here ... I wanted the perfect world where nothing bad happened, where mosquitoes didn't sting, where talented graphic artists had been charged with creating an all-engulfing Utopia, and had succeeded. And, unexpectedly, in that moment I felt closer to my 15-year-old son than I had in years.

This heart-sinking reality is what a gaming teenager feels like every time he or she is interrupted by “HAVE YOU DONE YOUR HOMEWORK?” This is why some of them would stay plugged in all day and all night if they were allowed. Life is just better in that entrancing universe ... nobody tells you to tidy your room, because your room is whatever perfect Nirvana you want it to be. I want to dance with my alien again; I want to sit on my riverbank instead of writing this article. I passionately want to go back, but I'm not sure I can cope with the disappointment that will inevitably ensue when the visor comes off and actual reality returns. ©

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*Emma Freud is a writer and columnist based in London*

Photos: Charlie Mackesy