



CONVERSATIONS

Emma Freud's legal highs: horror virtual reality

Emma Freud | Saturday November 07 2020, 12.01am, The Times

Share



Save



The legal high caused by excess adrenaline that's pumped around your body while watching a horror film is well-documented and has resulted in many a successful movie-night date. As the corpse/vampire/evil approaches, we go into fight or flight mode and our resources are reprioritised to surviving. When our brains realise we're not going to die, the fear subsides and into the void floods a blissful sense of wellbeing, occasionally followed by a back-row snog of relief.

This joy relies on knowing that we're in a cinema or watching TV, and that the edge of the screen marks out the edge of our engagement. So imagine the nightmare - and consequent buzz - of a truly terrifying film that takes place all around you, as well as inside your head, in graphic detail.



GETTY IMAGES

Horror virtual reality is a thing now and, to make it worse, it's constructed like a hybrid between the most graphic scary movie and an infuriating escape room. With a headset covering your face and plastic knob in your hand, you explore a horrendous location never knowing which route will lead to a jump scare. There's nowhere to hide and your eyes are telling you that every grinning, flesh-eating clown brandishing a meat cleaver is right there in front of your flesh, or possibly inside it.

An added layer of masochistic misery means that nothing happens until you take the first step. You have to find the horror before you then escape the horror, so you're forced to be actively complicit in your downfall.

The games vary in terms of terror. In the soft and cuddly *The Exorcist: Legion VR*, which you can play on PlayStation and Oculus headsets, you start off in a church, hearing the candid confession of Regan (she didn't die) before walking into a world of leather-masked cannibals and evil baby mannequins. Fun times. Headset on, I ran down every corridor and screamed at every blackened window, my blood pressure through the roof, while the future of a possessed child was held in my horribly sweaty hands.

I ended up crouched on the floor, frantically waving my arms at - apparently - nothing. A look that was incomprehensibly deemed amusing by those watching me. It was not, in fact, remotely funny. Even though the fearful high it creates is tangible, the games are a horrific life-size, lifelike, life-destroying experience. The greater problem is that when you tear the headset off, you're instantly back in life and lockdown, another briefing from 10 Downing Street, climate devastation, the Trump nightmare, and everyone saying the world is going to hell in a handcart. So, you know, maybe on balance . . .