

# Unreal Engine

by Zgjim Elshani

# Hell Chamber

In a whimsical attempt to save my own soul I will hereby recount, as well as I can, my encounter with the beast which, with large glowing lights spelling “the future is here,” gathered us around its ominous presence like rats around the Pied Piper. But we never jumped off the cliff—instead we sat on uncomfortable classroom chairs in a large, dimly lit and seemingly endless hall. We must have been many, because even considering the large size of this “hell chamber”<sup>1</sup> we were still brushing each other’s sweaty shoulders. I tried to adjust my chair but its legs were intertwined with my neighbour’s. After a few awkward and noisy attempts to untangle, I gave in to the stern looks and coughs of my fellow pilgrims, whom I was clearly disturbing in their anticipation of enlightenment, and finally sat still. The doors shut, and we were each handed a VR-headset that was connected to a central system with cables hanging from its front. As I put on the device, like an omen, the image of a giant leech wrapping itself around my head entered my mind. Left with an uneasy feeling and the quiet but constant whirring (a sign of operation) right in front of my face, I felt alone in a room with hundreds, perhaps thousands of bodies waiting for the spectacle to begin.

In dreams, you never wonder how you got there, and a bizarro world is as good as any. But in the waking world, watching strange and uninviting characters advertising their newest tricks and inventions in a distorted void doesn’t seem like something to be endured out of free will. In fact by that time, I had realised that my senses had gone into such disarray that it rendered my motor activity—and thus, also my will—useless. One might call it non-sensory overload. As the play kept unfolding, a rapidly growing hole opened on the inside of my stomach. I could not see it, but I could feel my body shrinking as it was being violently pulled in. I had to use all my strength and wisdom to stop myself from disappearing. I started thinking about my medication and how I would probably feel better if I hadn’t forgotten about it that morning. What if Thomas Anderson<sup>2</sup> had never taken any pills and had just gone back home to his computer? Not forgetting, but also not really knowing; in a half-state, existing in two worlds and living in none. I’m sure he would have been at least a little anxious. In that moment, I was also in a half-state, conscious and exhausted in the beta version of a foreboding prophecy, scrambling for a way to reconnect with my cramped-up body.

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I never made it. In fact, none of us did. Instead, the already fragile connections between our bodies and minds became collective casualties for the sake of immediate but false

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<sup>1</sup> Carlos Rebato, "Samsung Put Me In An Absurd Hell Chamber Of Virtual Reality Headsets", *Gizmodo*, February 21, 2016, <https://gizmodo.com/samsung-put-me-in-an-absurd-hell-chamber-of-virtual-rea-1760450121>.

<sup>2</sup> Government name of Neo, the protagonist in popular sci-fi film “The Matrix.” Wachowski, Lana, and Lilly Wachowski. 1999. *The Matrix*. Film. United States: Warner Bros.

progress. Now, as minds severed from any physical restrictions, we have gained hyper-speed in an abstract world designed by architects guided mainly by hyper-capitalism and the maximisation of profit. We are doomed to live with intense loneliness as it is extremely difficult to meet anybody at any given point in time and space when you are moving at this speed. All one can experience of others are infinitely repeating accidental collisions that appear and disappear in fractions of a second.

Entities without physical bodies that exist only as pure forms of intelligence, such as gods, alien life forms or even humans whose brain data has been transferred to the Cloud have often been romanticised as ultimate beings in religion, literature and film. This might be because they are perceived to be limitless and thus absolute, in the sense that without physical boundaries they reach into all known and unknown aspects of the universe. This state of universal interaction, where one is all and all is one, is something that can hardly be reproduced with the technology available today. While it is possible to collect data on physical interactions or emotional reactions, feed it into a computer and have it mimicked by machines, there is still a long way to go before any of it does justice to the human version. When speaking about the unrepresentable, the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard states that “one cannot represent the absolute, but one can demonstrate that the absolute exists—through ‘negative representation’, which Kant called the ‘abstract’.”<sup>3</sup>

Negative representation of symbols and objects is omnipresent in a world that must be filled with quickly withering content at a nauseating tempo. In this climate, the creation of new content and ideas has given way to re-creation and the replaying of reality and all its previous circumstances. Creation and creativity itself have been replaced with the task of transferring every single piece of information into the digital realm, regardless of its compatibility. This rather harsh and unfair process has led to the marginalisation and erasure of insufferable amounts of unexplored information about ourselves and the world we have lived in, which in turn has led to significant stalling in the potential appearance of novelty in our age.<sup>4</sup> We are left to re-chew what has already been digested by everyone before us, with nothing new to discover. We are trapped in a completely superficial, digital replacement of life, devoid of anything or anyone with the potential of freeing us from this wretched fate, which we met at the hand of the terrible beast.

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<sup>3</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, “Presenting The Unrepresentable: The Sublime,” in *The Sublime*, ed. Simon Morley (Whitechapel: MIT Press, 2010), 134.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Fisher, *Ghosts Of My Life* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014).

## The Mind Boggler

I shuddered deeply as I watched the needle sink into the skull and swiftly cut out a piece of bone the size of a small coin. My stomach demanded I look away but my curiosity was much stronger than my disgust, so I kept staring into the hazy, motionless eyes of this poor beast who, unlike me, had arrived in that particular situation unwittingly and purely by misfortune. The pig was just lying there, wearing its grandiose mechanical helmet, allowing it to freely work its magic, unaware of the power the helmet yields to elevate minds. The helmet in fact served as the arm of a surgical robot tasked with carefully embedding and connecting electronic devices to biological brains. In this case, an unfortunate pig's brain. The robot stood in the middle of the room, towering over its subject. It looked slick and shiny, matching the sterile and cold surroundings of its workplace. A brightly illuminated ceiling made sure that the handful of us standing close by, equipped with masks, gloves and protective glasses, could see all the details that the resolution of the human eye would allow. Outside of the glass walls, a few dozen important people who had been allowed to participate in person—unlike the rest of the world, who were following this event from their homes—stood awkwardly by their tasteless cocktail tables and watched.

But what was the goal of having a device implanted inside one's brain? If we believed what the slides during the initial presentation promised,<sup>5</sup> we would be dealing with miracles. A blind woman shall see, the bed-bound man will walk and the deaf will dance to their favourite tunes. Furthermore, if this experiment was successful, any issues stemming from chemical imbalances in one's brain, such as anxiety or depression, for example, would become things of the past—apparently they're only tiny hurdles to overcome, if complex mathematics and robots are involved. But that is not all. The main purpose of the device is not to establish internal communication, but to connect the human brain to an external digital network in order to allow data to flow directly in and out of our brains. A sort of telepathic connection with your contact list and every-day appliances with the help of an electronic mediator. At this point I started to wonder, would the pig be able to turn the machine against us once the procedure was completed? After all, a cyborg pig and a surgeon robot would have more in common with each other than either of them would have with a regular, unmodified human. The science and progress-serving robot, with no will of its own, now charged with the vengeful rage of a bionic pig. As I tried to suppress a grin, the strangely warm whirring coming from the tiny motors inside the surgeon,

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<sup>5</sup> Neuralink, "Neuralink Progress Update, Summer 2020", YouTube Video, 1:13:30, August 29, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DVvmgjBL74w&>.

accompanied by the horrific sounds of cold steel moving through wet flesh, quickly reminded me of my circumstances.

My heart sank the moment I remembered. Eventually it would be me who'd be sitting there. As I was in no way qualified to join the research as a scientist I foolishly volunteered as a subject, welcoming with open arms the demise of my own self. I even signed a paper to make sure my family would not be able to sue in the event that anything went wrong before, during or after the research was concluded. As the pressure started to rise in my head, I began to think that maybe getting a hole in there wouldn't be so bad after all. It turns out humans have been applying the practice of piercing their skulls, also known as *trepanation*, since before the dawn of time, hoping for effects not so different from what was promised by the device. While there's not *one* way to trepanate—various practices seem to have developed independently of one another—human skeletons with perforated skulls have been unearthed on every continent of our planet. The reason for these past applications ranged from medical, for example the treatment of head injuries or migraines, to spiritual and ritualistic, the pulling of spirits out of one's body or as an initiation ritual for priesthood. Research even suggests that some people located in southern Russia used to believe that through trepanation they could achieve a sort of 'transformation' and thus, depending on where in the skull the hole was drilled, acquire unique skills.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, modern proponents of trepanation like Bart Huges<sup>7</sup> and Joe Mellen<sup>8</sup>, who shared a kind of mentor–student relationship, underwent the procedure in order to gain an alternative state of mind.

In more technical terms, the heightened blood flow in your brain because of the hole is said to allow your brain to receive more oxygen, granting an eternal high. Huges lived for thirty-nine more years following the procedure and passed in 2004 at the age of seventy; Joe Mellen is still alive and high. The pig, on the other hand, was still unconscious and drooling. Or at least so I thought, because in the next moment, to everyone's surprise, the pig opened its eyes and, staring directly back at me, as if suddenly overcome by the realisation of its own fate, it released a deep and sorrowful "*oink*." Then, in an attempt to free itself, the pig shook its head upwards, causing the robot to move uncontrollably, crushing the poor pig's fragile brain. A few gasps from the audience and a long sigh from one of the doctors and it was over. All I could see was blood and some cables.

For a while after the incident, the scientists and doctors tried to figure out what had happened. The report says there were "unusual electromagnetic impulses" around the area where the device was supposed to be installed, but since there was no possibility the device could have somehow activated during the procedure, they wrote it off as an anaesthesiological mistake.

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<sup>6</sup> Maria Mednikova, Maria. 2003., "Prehistoric Trepanations In Russia: Ritual Or Surgical",. in *Trepanation*, ed. Robert Arnott, Stanley Finger, Chris Smith (London: CRC Press. Psychology Press, 2003) page number?.

<sup>7</sup> Bart Huges was a Dutch Librarian and medical school student, famous for applying trepanation to himself. Mellen, Joe. 2015. *Bore Hole*. Strange Attractor Press.

<sup>8</sup> Joe Mellen is a British writer who, after being influenced by Huges also applied trepanation onto himself. Mellen, Joe. 2015. *Bore Hole*. Strange Attractor Press.

## Congratulations!

Upon arrival, we were greeted by a team of large, bulky bodyguards whose main objective was to keep us from randomly walking off or interacting with the real guests in any way. After all, our presence there was secret and was to remain as such. One of the guards pulled out a sack made of purple satin. "First things first..." he said, nodding towards the smartphone that was in my hand. After the required two weeks of self-quarantine in preparation for the mission, I had grown even more attached to my phone as it had become my main mode of communication and interaction with other people. But as much as I resented this part of the agreement, the instructions and conditions were made clear from the start. "No phones on the island" also meant no communication with the outside world. And the outside world, at the time, was descending into chaos. Adding to the existing anxieties and challenges posed by living the capitalist lifestyle, a new deadly virus had appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, and begun wreaking havoc on the human population, killing millions in the process and threatening to destroy social life and the economy as we knew them. Out of fear, most of us retreated into our homes, reserving physical contact only for the most necessary needs and thus diving into a period marked by intense loneliness, no income and mind-blurring Zoom-fatigue. Everyone I knew was sick; some in better conditions and some in worse, but not one of them feeling good. Ironically enough, many of us who proclaimed ourselves to be digital natives and had fetishised life online quickly grew weary, beginning to resent screens when faced with the reality that online communication only covers a fairly superficial portion of human interaction. Nevertheless, it was still better than nothing, and nothing was what I was left with now.

After they took our phones, they gave us each a set of clothing: white shirt, white pants and flip-flops to blend in with the working staff. After a short drive, we arrived at a luxurious resort. If it had been built any closer to the clear blue water, it would have been standing completely in the sand. I imagine the dinner served that night was equally as impressive, but since I did not have much space left for food in my stomach I decided not to leave my room. I closed my window blinds, shut off the lights and pulled out my laptop, which I opened and placed on the nightstand next to my bed. Without any way of connecting to

the internet, in that moment the computer seemed to me as useful as a brick, but my body was still craving the familiar, cold, blue-ish light that radiated from its screen. As I lay uncomfortably on my bed, I tried to fight off feelings of guilt and convince myself I'd made the right decision by flying to a virus-free paradise island, while most of the rest of the world was trapped within their four walls, suffering the effects of the pandemic. And all for the sake of trying out some new technology that the company was developing. The lump in my stomach pulsed and I gulped as if to stop it from jumping out of my throat.

A few months prior, the company I was employed at, which specialised in “researching and developing creative ways of applying new technologies to warfare,” received a call from a very wealthy and influential man who had a rather unusual request. He wanted to use our *Holo-Drone* to surprise his equally wealthy and influential wife with a guest-appearance from her late father for her fortieth birthday party, which they planned to celebrate on a far-away island with a selection of forty healthy people, hidden from the prying, jealous eyes of the rest of the world who, like them, craved parties and gatherings with family and friends, but who were denied exactly these events by governmental measures.<sup>9</sup> The initial reaction to a top-secret project having been exposed so nonchalantly was “how the fuck does he know about this?” But the prospect of being able to test it out on an oblivious live audience, in secrecy, was enough to convince the company to greedily agree. The Holo-Drone, as the name already suggests, was a new technology for creating holographic images that could be remotely controlled by a pilot. The idea was that it could be used for infiltrating and disrupting crowds with nonexistent bodies, or to instil fear into the hearts of your enemies via astral projection invasions. In the case of this birthday party, I was hired as the pilot. I was not chosen because I was exceptionally talented, nor because of my great wits; in fact at that time they had already decided to let me go, stating that my capabilities were not meeting their standards, and that it would be better for everyone involved if I were to choose a different career.

But, as fate would have it, one of my worse habits—my tendency to dissociate—would prove to be key in piloting the Holo-Drone. “The other pilots are too conscious,” said one of the engineers when he saw my confused face. “When they hook up, they can’t let go of themselves. Having two bodies to interact with, the mind gets confused, leading it to rapidly travel between the meat-brain and the digital one. This doesn’t happen *for real*, of course, but it’s just to illustrate why the data-link overloads and makes their interfaces go *ka-boom*.” Some pilots were still in the hospital months after such accidents, trying to overcome the eerie, ‘non-existent’ pain of their phantom-bodies withering away somewhere in cyberspace. But, as the first test run would prove, that would not be an issue for my neural interface. I had no problem becoming someone else.

The next day I woke up looking at the reflection of myself in the black screen of the drained laptop. I briefly looked for my phone before remembering the purple satin sack. To my dismay, I learned that it was already early afternoon. Since my presence was not necessary, or useful, during the build-up stage, I figured the rest of the team had decided not to bother me. Or maybe they had forgotten about me all together, since I couldn’t spot any of the bodyguards who were supposed to stop us from walking around, even after sneaking out of my room. The island was indeed the perfect place, like an image on a postcard: exactly how you would picture it in your mind if someone asked you to imagine a paradise island.

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<sup>9</sup> Sophie-Claire Hoeller, “Kim Kardashian West’s Lavish Private Island Birthday Party May Have Cost Over \$2 Million, According To Resort Estimates And A Luxury Private Event Planner”, *Insider*, October 30, 2020, <https://www.insider.com/kim-kardashian-40th-birthday-party-private-island-cost-2020-10>.

While I was trying to enjoy the very pleasant weather I began to hear music coming from further down the shore. Foolishly, I decided to give in to my curiosity and go for a peek. I crawled into some bushes, trying to find a place where I could see well enough but remain hidden. I could not see much; just a few people on the beach. In the water, what looked like the tail of a large whale slammed onto the surface, causing the people on the boat next to it to scream in excitement. Suddenly, I heard a crack next to me. I turned my head, only to lock eyes with what looked like the spitting image of Matt Damon. He was taking a piss in the bushes. My heart stopped when he waved his free hand and said “Hi?” All I could think of was to turn around and run. Maybe he didn’t see my face? The lump started pulsating again as I ran.

A few hours later the birthday party was in full motion and I was getting ready to enter the pod for piloting the Holo-Drone. I hadn’t left my room until now out of fear of encountering the man from the bushes again and being exposed for having wandered off. The pod looked like a large egg and on the inside the interface was much less exciting than one would think. There was nothing but the cable that, through a magnetic connector, would link to my neural interface.

“Five minutes until show time,” I heard somebody say behind me as I felt a light push on my back, sending me into the pod. The door closed behind me and a few red LED lights turned on, giving just enough light to allow me to find the connector and hook myself up. At that moment, I couldn’t help but think of the endless hours of footage I had watched of her late father in order to better understand this man whose shoes I was about to step into. His facial expressions, the ways he gesticulated, how he would place emphasis on certain words, etc. While watching the footage, which, thanks to his own prominent status, there was plenty of, I also tried to understand the way he had thought and felt, and how he would feel or act finding himself resurrected at his daughter’s birthday party.<sup>10</sup>

From inside my head I heard, “Alright, all systems up and running. Going in in three...” This was not the first time someone had tried to resurrect someone else through technological means. We had all seen, in one form or another, the performance of Tupac’s hologram at Coachella in 2012. The audience went nuts; nobody cared if he was real or not. With a much darker tone, for a South Korean TV Show a mother was re-united with her deceased daughter in a virtual park.<sup>11</sup> Although the daughter’s poor dialogue and interactions made her seem like a badly scripted NPC, the mother’s emotional reaction seemed deeply genuine as she sobbed into her VR headset, leaving anyone who dared watch the show with an intensely eerie feeling. More recently, an American company ‘brought back’ a seventeen-year-old boy who had been shot on a basketball court.<sup>12</sup> Through deepfake technology he was to become the face of a new anti-gun violence campaign that never really took off—partly because, in the end, the video was much more reminiscent of a bad cutscene from a rushed Ubisoft game rather than a serious attempt at appealing to a human conscience. Again, a voice from inside my head: “Going live in ten, nine...” I closed my eyes and tried to focus but the lump in my stomach was starting to

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<sup>10</sup> Orit Halpern, "The Trauma Machine: Demos, Immersive Technologies And The Politics Of Simulation", in *Alleys Of Your Mind: Augmented Intelligence And Its Traumas*, ed. Matteo Pasquinelli (Meson Press, 2015) page number?

<sup>11</sup> Minwoo Park, "South Korean Mother Given Tearful VR Reunion With Deceased Daughter", *Reuters*, February 14, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southkorea-virtualreality-reunion/south-korean-mother-given-tearful-vr-reunion-with-deceased-daughter-idUSKBN2081D6>.

<sup>12</sup> "Unfinished Votes". 2020. *Unfinishedvotes.Com*. <https://unfinishedvotes.com/>.



give off a nervous pulse. By then I already knew that this meant nothing good, but it was too late. “Three, two, one, GO!”

Blinded by the sharp lights directed towards me, I could hear festive introduction music followed by cheers and applause as the ringing in my ears weakened. For a moment I was confused, having no idea how I got there or why I was four metres tall, but I soon realised what I was there for, at least. My beautiful, amazing daughter had turned forty that day, and we were all there to celebrate. Yes, even me, who died in 2003. Looking through the sea of half-faces, phones and flashlights, I found my daughter sitting in a chair across the hall. I looked her deep in the eyes as I began my speech: “Happy Birthday \*\*\*\*\*! Look at you! You are forty and all grown up.” Her eyes began to fill with tears as she looked at me in disbelief. “You look beautiful”— I paused for a moment as I was suddenly overcome with an inexplicable feeling of illness, but then somehow managed to continue—“just like when you were a little girl.”<sup>13</sup>

At this moment, the lump in my stomach pulsed, sending me a harsh and consequential reminder that I wasn’t me and that my body was waiting elsewhere in an egg-shaped pod. I felt a burning sting on the left hemisphere of my brain so strong that my legs gave in and I fell to my knees. I reached out to grab the connector and pull it out, but I could not find anything. With the disgusting smell of my own burning flesh crawling up my nose, I looked up in panic only to find horrified looks on the faces of the guests as they saw a gigantic man cowering in pain right in front of them. I was trapped in the hologram while my brain was receiving a deep-frying. As the pain quickly grew I began to scream in agony, wailing and flailing my arms around wildly. I was beginning to lose consciousness, but I could still hear the sharp sound of the fire alarm paired with terrified screams of the spectators, the sounds of breaking glass and tables being pushed over as everyone took for the exit in sheer horror. The last thing I saw, before the distastefully large “Happy Birthday” banner cut itself loose from the ceiling, falling to cover my holographic body, was the birthday girl being run over by her guests as they pushed and shoved each other through the door.

I woke up with a bit of a headache; I always do now. I had fallen asleep sitting at my computer again, with my phone in my hand. The TV was on, and there was Matt Damon, a low-class citizen, picking up space trash that fell on Los Angeles for a living. I had already seen that one before.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> BTM Afrika, “Surprise From Heaven: Kanye West Surprises Kim Kardashian With Hologram From Dad On 40th Birthday”, YouTube Video, 00:02:36, October 30, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mumSFH5zqnk&>.

<sup>14</sup> Neill Blomkamp, *Elysium* (2013, United States: Sony Pictures Entertainment) Film.