

UNFINISHED



November 23, 2022

Welcome back to the Unfinished newsletter, where we explore the intersection of tech, ethics, and social impact.

Did someone forward you this email? [Sign up to receive your own copy here.](#)



Thanksgiving in the Metaverse

Close your eyes and imagine you're sitting down for a delicious Thanksgiving dinner with your favorite people. The table is beautifully set, the candles are lit, the turkey is glistening, the mashed potatoes you prepared smell of garlic and chives.

As you bow your head in a moment of gratitude with your fellow diners, you reach your haptic gloves out and hold the hand of the avatar next to you. Your virtual reality headset contains "scentware" that is pre-loaded with Thanksgiving smells, and you find yourself getting hungrier and hungrier as the smell of green beans wafts its way into your nostrils. This could be Thanksgiving in the metaverse.

You use a fork developed by [researchers at the University of Maine](#) that uses electrodes to simulate the mouthfeel of salt, sour, bitter or sweet tastes. To complement your virtual reality headset and flavored utensils, you've splurged this year by purchasing what everyone is talking about: a [lickable TV screen](#) where 10 flavor canisters spray flavors directly onto a screen to simulate different tastes.

In between licks, you have a conversation with your great grandfather (since long passed away) whose avatar is also at the table, telling stories of strange times before screens and devices. You ask him what he thinks about the current state of democracy around the world, and [his avatar uses generative artificial intelligence](#) to formulate an opinion.

From lickable screens to flavored utensils to scented cartridges to AI-powered bots of deceased relatives that draw upon vast archives of that person's life, advances in technology are doing everything they can to simulate the sensory experience of real life.

The metaverse might allow you to connect with friends a world away or invite elderly relatives to participate in new ways, but is Thanksgiving in the metaverse really appealing to anyone? Is this just another example of tech trying too hard to achieve what's already (mostly) possible in real life? And have we done all the needed work to ask hard questions and future proof the emerging technology to work safely and ethically?

But before you write it off, the actual reality of virtual reality might have some real benefits. In a [study earlier this year](#), virtual reality sessions between people living with dementia in a senior care facility and their family members led to "improvements in older adults' affect and stress, relationship with their family member, and overall quality of life, compared to baseline. Family members' negative affect, depressive symptoms, and caregiver burden also decreased and their mental health improved after using the VR, compared to baseline."

The [AARP](#) is so convinced of the benefits of virtual reality for isolated seniors that it has developed apps for families to stay connected. It's also building virtual treatment rooms in the metaverse to replace mental health clinics and other forms of therapy.

A Thanksgiving in the metaverse could decrease loneliness and bring people together that would otherwise be unable to.

But as we explored this year at [Unfinished Live](#), we can't rely solely on digital solutions to solve human problems. Healthy, constructive online spaces start with healthy, constructive offline spaces. For us to design the digital platforms and online spaces necessary for a thriving democracy, there is no better place to start than in designing the conversational spaces around the tables we share with the people in our lives.

From dinner tables to new social media protocols, we are grateful to the Unfinished Network Partners who are working on building a stronger civic infrastructure. [More in Common](#) is focused on building more united, inclusive and resilient societies in which people believe that what they have in common is stronger than what divides them. [RadicalxChange](#) is working on "democratic innovation" by advancing plurality, equality, community, and decentralization through upgrading democracy, markets, the data economy, the commons, and identity.

And our own founder [Frank McCourt announced this week](#) that he is going all-in on [Project Liberty](#), by spending the majority of his time and effort building this initiative, which includes a coalition of partners working in ethics, governance, inclusion, and social impact. Project Liberty envisions a healthier digital ecosystem based on the open source base-layer protocol, DSNP, that puts users in charge of their data and their online identity.

Building the future of digital spaces will take us all, and we're grateful for the network of leaders, organizations, contributors, and thinkers that make up Unfinished and Project Liberty.

p.s. we used generative AI to create the painting above. We fed [DALL-E 2](#) the prompt, "grandparents at thanksgiving wearing VR headsets, watercolor", and this is how the AI responded.

Thank you for reading.

Follow Unfinished ([@byUnfinished](#) on Twitter and [@thisisunfinished](#) on IG) for ongoing chitchat on the changing web.

Have a great, restful weekend.

The Unfinished team

Project Liberty, 888 Seventh Avenue, 16th Floor, New York, New York 10106

[Unsubscribe](#) [Manage preferences](#)