Virtual environment optimization (VEO): The next evolution of SEO?

Reality is no longer limited to what you see in front of you. We now have alternative realities, including virtual and augmented.

These technological advances are making big changes in the world around us. It is important to have a full understanding of these concepts, as well as how to use them for the future of marketing and e-commerce.

Virtual and augmented reality are now surpassing the use of entertainment and also heading in the direction of businesses. Trends based on age, time and the pandemic are all leading toward a completely online commerce field.

Could we at some point eventually leave behind the era of SEO and enter a new state with new terms and theories?

What is virtual reality?

Virtual reality (VR) is a simulated environment created by computer technology.

Display technology allows for an immersive, virtual experience compared to traditional user interfaces. When virtual reality is applied, users are transported into a three-dimensional world where they can interact with a 3D environment.

The most recognizable component of virtual reality is the head-mounted displays (HMD). Popular companies that are already applying virtual reality to their products include HTC Vive, Oculus Rift and PlayStation VR (PSVR).

Three main types of virtual reality

Virtual reality can be broken down into three main sectors:

- **Non-immersive VR**: A computer-generated virtual environment in which the user is aware and controlled by the physical environment they are in. The most common example is a video game where players enter the “game world” with its own storyline and characters.
- **Semi-immersive VR**: An environment partially based in a virtual setting; typically used for training and educational purposes with large projector systems and graphical computing. An example of semi-immersive VR would be flight simulators that pilots have to use during training.
- **Fully-immersive VR**: The most realistic VR experience where sight and sound are fully immersed in the virtual setting. When wearing the appropriate VR gear, users will be able to see and feel the digital environment around them as if they are actually there.

Virtual reality vs. augmented reality

Augmented reality (AR) is the use of technology to enhance what users see in the real world, with a digital overlay that incorporates artificial objects. Augmented reality is able to combine elements of both the physical and digital world or adds digital elements to a live view.

2016 hit mobile phone app, “Pokemon Go” is a prime example of augmented reality. Users could walk around in the real world and search for Pokemon characters that would appear first on their phone screens, and then in the real space in front of them.

Put simply, here’s the main difference between VR and AR:

- **Augmented reality** is an addition to the real-world experience.
- **Virtual reality** is creating an entirely new atmosphere and experience from scratch.

What about the metaverse?

In broad terms, the metaverse will combine virtual and augmented reality to create a world that continues to exist even while you aren’t playing. It will be a realistic, online sphere where users can go to hang out with friends, attend work meetings and even buy and sell products.

In the idealistic version of the metaverse, the virtual items will be interoperable and allow you to take items from one platform to another.

Some people may argue that the metaverse has already existed for some time, specifically in video games. For example, “World of Warcraft” already allows the players to buy and sell goods. “Fortnite” has the option of virtual experiences, such as a generated concert or user-created exhibit.

However, someone claiming that “Fortnite” is the same as the Metaverse would be the same as someone claiming that Google is the epitome of the internet. There is much more to the scope of the metaverse and what it can potentially offer.

As it is still a work in progress, there is still some speculation on what exactly the metaverse will be and look like. However, it is apparent that the product has shaped new building blocks for the technological world.

For instance, there will soon be the ability to host hundreds of people in one single server, which could likely go up to thousands or even millions. There are also motion-tracking tools, which can be used to follow the users’ movements in

real-time. The metaverse will not only have a huge impact on entertainment and social aspects but on marketing as well.

Where we stand with virtual reality

It’s true that virtual reality has not yet lived up to its full potential, even acting as an unfulfilled promise over the years.

Solutions are needed to overcome obstacles in VR, including:

- Price and availability.
- Bulky headsets.
- Technical glitches.

However, statistics show that virtual reality is on the rise, in both popularity and demand.

Beyond recreation and at-home entertainment, virtual reality is being used in the following fields:

- **Training**: Law enforcement officers have started to use virtual reality as a cheap and safe alternative to training. Simulations can be used for interviewing suspects, practicing arrests, or dealing with dangerous scenarios.
- **Travel**: The travel industry suffered from the Coronavirus pandemic, and new inventions of VR helped to satisfy the wanderlust of many travel enthusiasts. Various companies have created immersive ways to travel the world, including National Geographic Explore VR – which lets you visit breathtaking places such as Antarctica or Machu Picchu.
- **Real Estate**: Companies like Zillow have started to integrate virtual reality into their business. Virtual reality can provide several benefits to real estate agents, such as cutting down costs, and time and letting

the potential buyer “window shop” through multiple homes at a time.

- **Military**: Virtual reality is a key technology used by the U.S. Department of Defense. Virtual reality is used by the military for training that is considered too expensive, rare or dangerous to perform in real life. It is also useful in manufacturing weapons, as well as optimizing equipment.
- **Sports:** A long-time tactic of sports teams has been studying recorded practices or games to analyze the performance of players and their opponents. Now with the use of virtual reality, major sporting sectors such as the NFL, NASCAR and the NBA have all begun to use VR to help with practice and training in real-time simulations.
- **Entertainment:** When people first think of virtual reality it is typically for entertainment. Video games are the most common source of VR or AR. However, there are other forms of VR entertainment – immersive cinema and VR amusement parks.
- **Architecture**: Advances in virtual reality have been able to act as a powerful tool for communicating design intent with architects. Using VR can help with stages including design-to-construction, evaluating designs and showcasing proposals and working out errors before the building process begins.
- **Art:** Artists can push the boundaries and limitations of their work using virtual reality. Consumers can “enter” the piece of artwork through interactive videos, walkthroughs, and 360-degree spherical panoramas that feel like museum-quality exhibitions.
- **Aviation**: Pilots must undergo extensive training by using flight simulators and computer screens. Virtual reality has become a more efficient alternative to previous flight simulators, which were either too expensive or bulky. With the use of VR, pilots can practice the in-flight experience, and even build

planes.

- **Conference rooms**: Facebook has introduced the potential future for conference calls through VR: Horizon Workrooms. Instead of sitting on Zoom, employers and their employees will soon be able to enter a VR space with their own avatars and sit around a digital conference table together.
- **Data visualization** – Virtual reality and augmented reality can help communicate information faster and in a more digestible manner. Concepts like the stock market, climate change, and even Brexit would be easier to understand for businesses with the help of VR data visualization.
- **Journalism (immersive journalism)**: Immersive journalism describes digitally produced stories that help create a first-person experience with the news and ongoing events. Virtual reality has been used for immersive journalism in cases such as in Guantanamo Bay, where a journalist virtually entered the prison to obtain real audio and visuals to obtain a story.
- **Marketing/advertising**: Virtual reality can enhance marketing and advertising for just about any company. Providing a realistic experience of a product to customers can help push the likelihood of them purchasing it. Volvo Reality was the first example of a VR test drive to let potential buyers touch, feel, and experience their vehicles.
- **Social media**: Facebook's rebrand to Meta is one of the main examples of VR entering the world of social media. Facebook Horizon will allow users to experience social events together, chat with friends, and even build virtual worlds. There are also VR apps such as VRChat and REC Room which allow users to meet and play games in public and private rooms.

SEO and marketing in virtual reality: Staying on top of trends

“As technology is evolving so rapidly, it is important that companies incorporate new technologies into their business to help keep up with the times,” said Cas Paton, MD of Onbuy.com

There are many indicators pointing to the future of shopping going fully online. As the audience gets younger, the urge to avoid stores is greater.

Based on an OnBuy.com survey, 53% of those between the ages of 25-34 would rather shop online than go into a physical store. One of the reasons for this is to avoid talking with the staff while inside the shop. In addition, 61% of millennials claim to find it more efficient to speak with a retailer via text or online chat.

There has been a huge shift into e-commerce, as online stores become the showrooms for customers to try out a product, and the physical store acts as an experience center, rather than just a place to buy a product.

Generation Z (Gen Z) refers to the group of people who were born in the late 1990s into the early 2000s. Gen Z is a unique, new breed of consumers. Growing up in a world full of technology has affected the way that young people view their shopping experience. It is assumed that this generation will have a huge impact on the way people shop in the future.

According to studies, Gen Z has no loyalty to brands and wants to consistently change their style and appearance to keep up with current trends. This can make it difficult for brands to earn their trust; however, it does leave room for other opportunities.

Instagram has taken advantage of the fast-paced shopping among the youth, with one of their latest features including the

linking of brand’s sites directly in a posted picture.

The Coronavirus pandemic has also had a huge impact on the shopping industry. When the world was in lockdown, it was impossible to go into physical stores to purchase goods.

However, this created a massive increase in online shopping. In fact, Amazon’s revenue soared with a 40% increase during the COVID lockdown.

Considering all the above factors, it is clear that the ways of physical shopping are a thing of the past.

Consumers now seek quicker, more efficient ways to buy their products. With the use of advanced technology, people of all ages can buy whatever they want at the touch of their fingertips.

What’s next: Virtual environment optimization (VEO)?

Virtual and augmented reality have already begun making a huge impact in a variety of fields. Why shouldn’t we assume the next area of domination would be in shopping and e-commerce?

If it’s an immersive, online experience that shoppers want, then it seems like VR and AR are the answer for the future.

Current examples of virtual and augmented reality used in marketing include Nike’s VR world experience to try on clothing and shoes, and IKEA’s “The Place” app which allows shoppers to use AR to place furniture in their homes.

Imagine buying a new outfit from your favorite store, or shopping for your weekly groceries from the comfort of your home. While cell phone apps can already assist in buying products online, the opportunity that VR has to offer for online shopping can exceed any current shopping experience we

currently see today.

There is clearly no sign of technology slowing down, and it is the responsibility of marketers to stay on top of the future of VR commerce.

Search engine optimization (SEO) has been a huge part of marking and commerce in the last few years, but the future of virtual reality commerce could bring a new term into existence: **virtual environment optimization (VEO)**.

Mindy Weinstein, founder and CEO of Market Mindshift, believes virtual reality is here to stay, and as SEO, we need to adapt and be prepared to market within this new environment:

“The metaverse’s growth is inevitable and it is something that we should start taking into account now,” Weinstein said. “For instance, given that the metaverse is a visual environment, we should ensure that optimized images are included in our SEO content strategies. Also, the metaverse is already set up for audio, so it is not a big leap of imagination that some type of voice search option will be developed. Therefore, I believe that as the metaverse evolves, voice search needs to be top of mind for digital marketers.”

More to come

Tune in to our next article to find out about marketing in virtual reality and optimizing for the future of virtual reality and augmented reality.

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Taylor Kurtz was born and raised in Tampa, Florida. Taylor then moved to Tallahassee to attend Florida State University, where he obtained his bachelor’s degree in sports management and his MBA. Taylor focuses exclusively on SEO and owns/operates Crush the Rankings, an award-winning digital marketing agency that focuses on high-quality Search Engine Optimization and website development. Taylor is also a Business Professor at the local community college in Fort Collins, CO and speaks around the country, discussing SEO at various digital marketing summits.

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