

When They Came For Us

Objectives

What if You Had to Defend Your Own Freedom—to an Alien?

When They Came for Us is an immersive advocacy experience that asks: What would you do if you were abducted by an alien and forced to argue for your own freedom? Blending virtual reality with advanced generative AI, this experience places users in the position of a human being detained by a powerful extraterrestrial. The alien demands an explanation: why shouldn't it use humans for pleasure, as humans exploit other animals?

Participants engage in a real-time conversation with the alien using the headset's microphone. Thanks to cutting-edge language software, the alien responds dynamically, creating a fluid dialogue rather than a series of predetermined prompts. This organic back-and-forth mimics a genuine conversation, encouraging users to think critically and empathetically as they defend their right to autonomy, something animals are rarely afforded.

By mirroring how humans justify the use of animals in food, clothing, research, and entertainment, the experience fosters empathy and reflection. It invites participants to examine their own speciesist assumptions and consider the rights of other sentient beings.

PETA, which stands firmly against speciesism, a belief in human superiority, developed this experience to promote compassion. The organization focuses on industries where animals suffer most: laboratories, agriculture, fashion, and entertainment. Through public education, investigations, legislative work, celebrity engagement, and emerging technologies like *When They Came for Us*, PETA strives to inspire a more empathetic, cruelty-free world.

Strategy and Execution

In collaboration with Demodern, a leading German-based software development company known for its pioneering work in virtual and augmented reality, PETA has launched an innovative immersive experience titled *When They Came for Us*. The project builds on more than a decade of PETA's exploration of

technology-driven advocacy, taking the organization's message into a new dimension that combines digital storytelling with cutting-edge virtual interaction.

Demodern brought its extensive expertise in VR and AR to the table, helping PETA craft an experience that is not only visually compelling but also emotionally impactful. The goal was to find new and compelling ways to tell stories that encourage people to question deeply ingrained social norms and challenge speciesist thinking. Through immersive technology, the experience encourages users to step into an alternate perspective that mirrors the experience of animals who are treated as commodities, stimulating critical reflection on human behavior and ethics.

When They Came for Us centers around a scenario in which participants are abducted by an alien species and must convince their captor not to use them for the alien's own pleasure. The metaphor is powerful and unsettling: it puts the participant in the shoes of animals used by humans in various industries. By engaging users in a simulated conversation powered by AI-driven dialogue and delivered through a virtual reality headset, the experience seeks to foster empathy and shift perspectives.

This initiative is more than just a stand-alone product; it's a mobile campaign tool. As part of its robust college outreach strategy, peta2, PETA's Youth Division, took *When They Came for Us* on the road. A specially trained team travelled across the United States, bringing the experience to university campuses where it was set up as an interactive educational event. Students were invited to participate in the VR simulation and engage in post-experience discussions with team members. These conversations provide opportunities to delve deeper into the issues of animal rights, ethical treatment, and the concept of speciesism.

The outreach team uses this captivating, immersive experience to break down barriers that often prevent people from considering the plight of other animals. By personalizing the ethical dilemma and framing it in a science fiction context, the program captures attention in ways that traditional advocacy tools sometimes cannot. The emotional resonance created through real-time interaction and immersive storytelling fosters a more lasting impression, opening the door to empathy and meaningful change.

Moreover, *When They Came for Us* is not limited to in-person events. The experience is also available for free on the Meta Store and can be accessed by anyone with a Meta Quest 2, 3, or Pro headset. This broader availability ensures that people who are interested in exploring animal rights through a new lens can engage with the content on their own time, from anywhere in the world.

By integrating virtual reality, generative AI, and emotionally intelligent storytelling, *When They Came for Us* exemplifies how PETA continues to evolve its mission through innovation, connecting with new audiences and inspiring a more compassionate world.

Results

When They Came for Us has resonated strongly with participants, who describe it as “a very natural and casual way to engage” with challenging topics and find the technology itself “exciting.” In fall 2024, we brought the experience to several universities, engaging students, professors, and administrators firsthand.

At Temple University, one campus visitor remarked, “It was so surreal. It really felt like I was speaking with someone,” reflecting on the uncanny realism of conversing with the AI alien overlord. The simulation, which forces participants to defend humanity’s right to survive, adapts dynamically, responding uniquely to each individual’s words. Similarly, a philosophy professor who tried the experience at Eastern Michigan University compared it to “talking to an extremely informed and well-educated activist.” They were “impressed by how clearly the virtual alien ... understood what he was saying and came up with unique responses to each of his questions and answers.” This flexibility exemplifies our aim of “lowering the bar for people to engage with their own biases.”

Our goal is to use immersive technology to challenge participants to confront speciesism and reconsider how humans view other animals. By offering a safe yet emotionally powerful environment, *When They Came for Us* fosters empathy and spurs critical self-reflection. As one participant noted at Temple, “If you put yourself in the headspace of truly asking ‘What if this was real?’ it becomes a scary thing”.