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Achieve vertigo with virtual reality art

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Slowly you make the first steps forward in a dense forest. With every move, you feel the moss like a soft carpet under your feet. You smell the freshness of the trees and feel the moisture of the plants make little drops of water on your skin. Suddenly you enter an open spot surrounded by huge rocks. A yellow snake of monstrous proportions slithers toward you, his beak open and his poisonous tongue ready to kill you with one swift touch. Just before he reaches you, you jump up and spread your arms, only to find two wings attached to your shoulders, and you fly away. Smoothly you find yourself floating over the forest towards the rocks. Still panting from the shock, you calmly land on a piece of Alpine meadow. You made it, you are safe.

No, this is not the stuntman of The Hunger Games hero Katniss Everdeen (https://thehungergames.wikia.com/wiki/The_Woods?file=KAtniss_hunting_in_the_woods.png) flying through the studio, but you and your imagination tied to a virtual reality (VR) mask. Virtual reality is gaining momentum right now, and we are the direct witnesses of this revolutionary development with applications for the technology popping up on a daily basis and changing the way people engage with the world around them. City planning, traffic prediction, environmental protection and security planning are fields in which VR is increasingly used. However, there is another field that is free riding on the booming technology: the art and entertainment sector.

Re-creation of real-life

Before we dive into an inquiry of virtual reality in the art scene, let us first see what virtual reality entails. One suitable scholarly definition can be found in an article of Rothbaum (https://www.psychiatrist.com/JCP/article/Pages/2001/v62n08/v62n0808.aspx); VR is a technological simulation of a real-life situation that uses "body-tracking devices, visual displays and other sensory input devices to immerse a participant in a computer-generated virtual environment that changes in a natural way with head and body motion". In non-scholarly words, VR is a re-creation of a real-life setting in a digital world.

The development of VR goes hand-in-hand with that of augmented reality (AR), which adds computer-generated images atop an existing reality and merges the real world with these context-specific images. AR thus adds a layer of virtual content on the real world, such as the filters on Snapchat, while VR creates a brand-new digital world--for example through a video game. AR applications are ahead of VR applications with some affordable products already on the commercial market.

Numerous applications like Inkhunter (https://inkhunter.tattoo/), SkyMap (https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.google.android.stardroid&hl=en), Yelp (https://www.yelp.ca/vancouver), barcode and QR scanners (https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.gamma.scan&hl=en) and AR glasses like Google Glass (https://www.techradar.com/reviews/gadgets/google-glass-1152283/review) give people the opportunity to experience AR in their everyday lives. Augmented reality devices are nowadays more accessible than VR devices due to the easily displayable feature on a smartphone or tablet while VR needs expensive headset and software devices. The Oculus Rift (https://www.oculus.com/), developed by a division of Facebook, is an early adapter that is available on the commercial market for a more accessible price.

(https://visualhunt.com/f/photo/25281804114/898da82f94/)

Virtual reality art

The Whitney Museum of American Art in New York exhibited Jordan Wolfson's VR art installation Real Violence, that immerses people for five minutes in a violent act. The experience is described as 'shocking' (https://www.artnews.com/2017/03/01/a-history-of-violence-jordan-wolfson-on-his-shocking-foray-into-vr-at-the-whitney-biennial/) and 'captivating' (https://www.artnews.com/2017/05/02/lets-get-real-tisch-abelow-on-jordan-wolfsons-real-violence-at-the-whitney-biennial/), with people nervously waiting in line before they put the mask on their face. Wolfson uses VR to replicate the everyday world, contrary to other artists who use VR to bring people face to face with fantasy creatures in a more video game style.

An increasing number of museums and artists have discovered VR as a new medium to display their artefacts and information. The technology is still nascent but is picking up very fast in the last two years. In 2015, Daniel Steegmann Mangrané created a virtual rainforest Phantom (https://www.danielsteegmann.info/works/41/index.html), presented during the New Museum Triennial. Likewise, visitors of the London's Frieze Week could lose themselves in the Sculpture Garden (Hedge Maze) (https://www.arsenalmontreal.com/en/exhibitions/jon-rafman-2) of Jon Rafman. In January the New Museum and Rhizome presented VR artworks from six of the medium's leading pioneers, including Rachel Rossin, Jeremy Couillard, Jayson Musson, Peter Burr and Jacolby Satterwhite. Rossin (https://www.newinc.org/rachel-rossin/) was even appointed as the museum's first virtual reality fellow working for the museum's VR incubator NEW INC. She is an independent VR artist, working without any outside developers, to translate oil paintings into VR.

'2167'

Earlier this year, the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) (https://www.tiff.net/) announced a VR collaboration with producer Imagine Native (https://www.imaginenative.org/new-page-5/), an arts organization that supports Indigenous filmmakers and media artists, and the Initiative for Indigenous Futures (https://abtec.org/iif/), a partnership of universities and community organizations dedicated to Indigenous people's futures. They launched a VR project called 2167 as part of the nation-wide project Canada on Screen (https://www.tiff.net/canadaonscreen/), that celebrates Canada's 150th anniversary in 2017.

The project commissions six Indigenous filmmakers and artists (https://www.imaginenative.org/new-page-5/) to create a VR project that considers our communities 150 years in the future. One of the participating artists is Scott Benesiinaabandan (https://www.benesiinaabandan.com/about/), an Anishinabe intermedia artist. His work, primarily focused on cultural crisis/conflict and its political manifestations, has been awarded multiple grants from the Canada Council for the Arts, Manitoba Arts Council and the Winnipeg Arts Council, and works as an artist in residence for the Initiative for Indigenous Futures at Concordia University in Montreal.

Benesiinaabandan had been interested in VR before his project, but wasn't sure where VR would go. He started learning about the technology while completing his MFA at Concordia University and started working on 2167 at the same time.

"I worked closely with a technical programmer who briefed me on programming and the complicated technological aspects. It took a lot of man hours to fully learn how to program in a highly professional way, but I made it to an intermediate level," he says. For the 2167 project, Benesiinaabandan created a virtual reality experience that lets people immerse themselves in an abstract world where they hear snippets of conversations from the future. The artist, who has been reclaiming his Indigenous language for a certain number of years, talked with elders from Indigenous communities and worked with a writer to develop stories about the future of Indigenous people. They even had to create new Indigenous words for 'blackhole' and other futuristic concepts, because these words did not exist in the language yet.

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