

Versions 2016: Trends in virtual reality and culture

by Emma Chiu - Wednesday, March 30, 2016

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The first Oculus Rift headsets shipped to consumers this week, almost four years after the product launched on Kickstarter and ignited the current wave of interest in virtual reality. As reviews pour in from tech journalists, it's a good time to look beyond product features and ask: how will VR shape culture and creativity in the years to come?

Earlier in March, the Innovation Group attended Versions, a new event billed as the “first festival on creativity and VR.” Hosted at the New Museum in Manhattan, Versions gathered a broader group than the typical technology conference, drawing journalists, filmmakers, critics, artists, and more.

“We’re specifically not Silicon Valley people” said Versions co-organizer Jamin Warren, who also founded the videogame arts and culture company [Kill Screen](#). “That sort of outsider approach, with us being housed here in New York City, gives us a different way to start thinking about some of the questions that VR will raise.”



Rachel Rossin, Lossy, Zieher Smith & Horton

Hype cycle

People who are new to virtual reality, or old enough to remember past disappointments, want to know if it's here to stay. Panelists at Versions had a lot to say about this.

Andrew Shoen, a venture capital investor at New Enterprise Associates, said that for at least 30 years, people have been talking about VR as “10 years away in terms of a totally immersive, awesome experience that integrates with the senses at super-high fidelity.” Finally, he said, it's getting closer.

Three factors are pushing VR forward, he said: improvements in supply chain fundamentals like faster and better display technology, companies bringing more consumer products to market, and a creative community producing content and discovering best practices for VR narratives. Still, he said, “there's

going to be a classic hype cycle unfolding in the next few years.”

Janet Murray, a noted expert on interaction design and author of *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, agreed. “We’re at a moment right now which will pass, where the novelty of just being in the virtual world and making an effect in it is thrilling in itself,” she said. “In six months, people are going to say VR is dead, so you should brace yourselves.”

Expectations around the technology are becoming impossibly inflated, Murray said, but we shouldn’t be discouraged. “I think that it’s very important not to pay attention to people saying it’s dead because they didn’t make money from it,” she said. “What you can see is the conjoining of a community of practice, and that lasts.”

Schoen predicted that at CES 2017, we may see as many as 50 head-mounted display products, a situation he described in terms of evolution. As many of these products die off amid the competition, brands and companies that adopt a flexible, nimble approach to virtual reality will emerge on the other side. “Be the cockroach,” he said.

What this means: VR is here to stay, whether this year’s product launches live up to expectations or not.



Versions conference at The New Museum

VR for the YouTube generation

Panelists noted that for now, VR fails to match up with our expectations of media. When every teenager seems to have a YouTube channel and expects to create media, not just consume it, how can a medium that seems to require extensive technical knowledge and costly equipment take root?

Jesse and Meredith Finkelstein experienced this firsthand when they tried to create a VR runway for their fashion company Print All Over Me. “We were looking, where is the Flickr of VR scenes, or the iMovie to create VR scenes?” said Meredith. “We didn’t find anything.”

Instead of accepting the situation, they launched [Kokowa](#), which co-founder Peter Zusman described as a “platform for creating 3D VR and AR experiences online easily.” The site allows users to pull together 3D models, sounds, textures and videos to create 3D, narrative collages. While Google Cardboard is democratizing the experience of consuming VR content, Zusman said, “the creation of VR is mostly enterprise-only, and we’re aimed at changing that.”



Kokowa co-founded by Peter Zusman

Jesse Finkelstein sees this as an opportunity for brands. Car companies, for example, could “collage” their existing 3D product models into virtual space, allowing for a dynamic digital engagement with their product.

“For me, the most exciting thing is less about the idea of replicating what’s real,” he said. “It’s more about things that are projective, like what you can imagine that doesn’t exist, and how brands can offer these sort of imaginative experiences.

Another company, [DepthKit](#), was at the event to explain how its cheaper way of capturing real-world scenes would make VR relevant to the YouTube generation. While the volumetric video typically used to record VR is prohibitively expensive or too low-res, DepthKit allows cameras to capture depth information with the addition of a single sensor.

What this means: Soon, people will be able to create their own VR scenes, not just consume them. With these tools, brands can co-create immersive product experiences alongside consumers.

VR and Empathy

Throughout Versions, debates simmered over what VR was capable of doing differently than other forms of media. People were especially interested in the concept of empathy: is VR a uniquely powerful “empathy engine,” as many in the [tech press](#) say, or should we resist defining VR’s moral and ethical properties independently of how people use it?

Many panelists offered evidence for VR’s unique effects. Sam Dolnick, an associate editor at the New York Times who has been involved in the paper’s recent VR initiatives, said that he had always known about unpalatable side of factory farming, but that after watching a VR documentary that takes viewers inside a Mexican slaughterhouse, he went vegetarian.



Filmmakers Milica Zec and Winslow Turner Porter III were showing their VR film [Giant](#). The film takes viewers into a basement in a war zone, where two parents try to convince their child that bomb blasts are only the footprints of an approaching giant. The filmmakers said viewers waited up to six hours to see the film during its premiere at Sundance in January, and often left in tears.

Other participants, including Marte Roel of BeAnotherLab, cautioned against taking the concept of empathy lightly when it comes to VR. Roel's project, The Machine To Be Another, allowed VR users to simulate being in the bodies of people of other genders, and many [found the experience convincing](#). But Roel and others said that an easy commodification of empathy could cheapen the concept and lead VR creators into ethically dubious territory.

What this means: VR can trigger powerful emotional responses from viewers, and while this can be great for storytelling, creators should tread carefully.

Active embodiment

Another conversation at Versions concerned, on the one hand, best practices for delivering a feeling of embodiment to VR users, and on the other hand, how users might respond to these embodied experiences.

An exchange between Andrew Schoen, the investing professional, and Janet Murray, the interaction researcher, again proved enlightening. Schoen described picking up and throwing a fireball in virtual reality, and how his hand actually felt hot from interacting with a virtual object. "If you're given enough input at a high-enough level of fidelity, your brain will fill in the gaps," he said.



Janet Murray responded that such references to total physical presence raised expectations too high. “There’s a lot I do with my body, and I know the Kinect doesn’t get most of it,” she quipped. Instead, she proposed that we need a set of “clearly defined interaction mechanics that map onto the storytelling” so that expectations for VR match more clearly with the reality of the technology.

Murray said that an interactive object held in the hand, for example, could serve as a “threshold object” and go a long way toward creating a sense of embodiment. “People think immersion comes from a lot of pixels, but actually, it comes from the active creation of belief through interaction,” she said. “I think of an idea about the world, I act on it, the world responds. That is what makes people deeply involved.”

What this means: For true immersion, VR creators should help viewers feel invested in VR experiences, rather than just trying to make convincing replicas of the real world.

Virtual empowerment

If VR creates a greater sense of embodiment than other online experiences, will people ultimately find this liberating, or feel more vulnerable? For now, the question feels hypothetical, but with “social VR” already being discussed by Facebook, it’s fast approaching.



INTIMACY, EMBODIMENT, AND ALIENATION with Ela Darling, Jacolby Satterwhite, and Katherine Isbister

Adult performer and entrepreneur Ela Darling described launching the VR porn platform VRTube.xxx, and how she became the world’s “first VR cam girl.” Her latest project is a live chat session filmed in her bedroom and broadcast via VR devices. Darling said that thanks to the true-to-life setting, “you really get a sense of who I am before I say a word. That really pushes the intimacy and the experience is so much more compelling.”

“I think about [VR clients] differently than I do my other clients,” she continued. “Even though I’m not in a virtual world, the fact that they are accelerates the relationship quite a bit.” But she said any sense of vulnerability in VR was much less scary than what she experiences in the real world, where she is regularly harassed on the street (including on the day of the conference).

The artist Jacolby Satterwhite creates 3D visualizations that combine digital fantasies with scanned artifacts from his personal history, including family photos and representations of his body that are often

sexually charged. He's currently adapting his piece *EPA: Music of Objective Romance* as an interactive online experience and Oculus Rift game.

"My level of disembodiment in the virtual realm is uncanny," he said. "That's what I can do those kinds of provocative, transgressive gestures and not feel like it's me, because it's not me. It's just a part of the composition that makes me feel like my piece is resolved. So I don't feel vulnerable there, but I feel vulnerable here."

What this means: As VR becomes more social, it could leave users feeling vulnerable or empowered, but either way will be a compelling canvas for self-expression.



En Plein Air by Jacoby Satterwhite and Trina By Taylor Renee





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