

# “IN SEARCH OF REALITY”

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper explores our expectations of and desires for constructing alternative realities, which goes some way to explaining our fascination for designing digital virtual worlds. It reveals some of the key principles and opportunities that are driving content creators in VR/AR experiences and situates these within a broader aspiration for world making, the history of which can be traced to a number of other cultural pursuits, from shopping to sport. In so doing, it identifies the central pillar of VR/AR design as a process towards story-inhabiting, an evolution of story-telling that is predicated on the concepts of interactivity, immersion, and point of view experiences. In conclusion, it interrogates the contested terrain of reality within the socio-political sphere, arguing that alternative digital reality environments must transcend the desire to simply replicate our everyday experiential reality and look towards enabling a wider range of sensorial experiences to ensure unique and transformative experiences for participants.*

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# IN SEARCH OF REALITY

This paper sets out a perspective on virtual reality that takes us deeper into the history of our pursuit of new realities, as a way of accessing a wider understanding of the design opportunities that surround digital VR experiences.

The consequence of my position is that we must look for wider inspiration to satisfy the users' desire to inhabit digitally created virtual worlds. In so doing, we can learn a lot from the complexity of these other, alternate worlds and extend the practice of VR beyond its present manifestations.

I want to start – and end - with the title of this essay and this takes me first to physics.

## 1979: PHYSICS & THE NATURE OF REALITY

In 1979, Bernard D'Espagnat [Despanya] wrote that 'physics and the problem of reality' and more specifically, 'the problem of 'what is' is central to all other inquiries.

And while it might appear to be a simple matter of fact to talk about a reality that exists out there, which can be substantiated through scientific evidence, the entire history of modern philosophy has taught us otherwise. This is not to deny the integrity of a reality, which exists and which is identifiable through some kind of sensorial measurement, but to note that a perspective on this reality may be simply a function of those sensorial biases, or the particular limitations of our measuring instruments.

Consider light, for instance. We can see light in a particular way as human beings, but we know that light is also seen differently by different species. There is no reality out there which will satisfactorily adjudicate on which of these is the more credible version of a singular reality, or the more real. It is simply a matter of what a particular kind of biological capacity can perceive and, sometimes, having one kind of perceptive ability limits our capacity to enjoy another.

This leads me to consider one particular case: a VR encounter created by Marshmallow Laser Feast called *In the Eyes of the Animal*, from 2016. There are a number of reasons for why this experience won the Wired Audi Innovation Award, but I like to think that it has to do with this question about the search for reality. ITEOTA takes you into the sensorial perspective of non-human species, rather than simply locate you within other contexts. The encounter is staged within a forest and the headset is modified to become more organic

A lot of VR work focuses on putting us into extraordinary situations – and there’s a lot of mileage here – who wouldn’t want to know what it feels like to be on top of Everest, or kayaking down the world’s toughest rapids – but in these experiences the "us" remains in tact. MLF remind us that our capacity to experience the world differently is one of the central opportunities that digital VR provides us with.

The project we produced with MLF and Abandon Normal Devices exploring the artistic potential of drones also alludes to this aspiration. The public fascination with camera enabled drones is, again, partly about the desire to occupy our skies, to be like birds, to defy our gravitational limitations as human beings, to enjoy the perspective of other species – and perhaps, in so doing, to derive some greater insight into our place within the world. And of course, it connects us with a longer historical fascination with such pursuits.

Each of these examples reminds us that, to fully come to terms with the possibilities afforded by VR, we must dig deeper into physics to arrive at an idea about reality that is as rich as one may derive, rather than simply an imitation exercise.

In other words, for your next VR project, include a physicist in your early design conversations or, better, yet, find a designer that has a good grasp of the complexities of physics.

## 2007: COGNITION AND THE REALITY OF PERCEPTION

Yet, the search for reality has engaged other forms of perspective too. Damien Hirst’s work by this name from 2007 is one such example. His search for reality consists of an art work composed of pill cabinets, containing bottles of (fake) pills. It is part of a series of works that were described as “glass, stainless steel, steel, aluminium, nickel, bismuth and cast resin, coloured plaster and painted pills with dry transfers” It sits alongside other works titled ‘In search of Nirvana’, ‘In Search of Paradise’, ‘In Search of Knowledge’, ‘In Search of Truth’, ‘In Search of Oblivion’ and ‘In Search of Nirvana’.

Hirst’s inquiry into reality was realized in a period of anxiety about the burgeoning pharmaceutical industries – which would lead us to a point where marketing drugs as a fix to human ailments, or as a means of escaping our realities, would become synonymous with the height of consumer culture and the desire for immediate solutions to our problems. In his website, Hirst says,

*“They look like real pills; that’s all that matters [...] Art’s not real life. I’m into theatre not ‘truth to materials’. The whole dilemma is:*

*Is it real or isn't it?"[1] The cabinets are representative of the position of power that pharmaceuticals hold in our lives and the manner in which science has, for many, replaced religion in the structure of our belief systems."*

The year following Hirst's work, I published a book with Dr Emma Rich titled 'The Medicalization of Cyberspace', which drew on some of these motifs. It speaks of the growing anxiety about the very real prospects of being able to disrupt evolution through biotechnology, the consequence of which would be a rupture in the fabric of our realities, within which we had assumed certain trajectories would govern all aspects of life.

These two works also found themselves at the beginning of the social media era, which would be another rupture in our fabric of reality, a true War of the Worlds moment – but not the version that we all believe – which is that Orson Welles broadcast led to all kinds of panic.

In fact, the kind I mean is much more aligned with what actually happened. As Slate explains, the panic was a product of the newspapers sensationalizing the story – part of its war with radio, which saw them attempting to discredit this new machinery of fake news. Similarly, in 2007, just as TIME magazine announced 'we' were person of the Year, platforms like The Onion launched major online assets in platforms like YouTube, led by video, and we became slaves to an information ecosystem that has conditioned our behavior and collapsed all other media boundaries.

This blurring of realities was emerging as a playground for world makers, whose use of the media allowed us to disrupt conventional hierarchies and lead us to re-imagine the limits of reality, as this mockumentary of a theme park engineer taught us.

And so, to pursue Slate's line of inquiry, we find the example of the myth of the War of the Worlds compelling because it resonates with a deeper anxiety about the power of the media to occupy our lives, as their citation of Jeffery Sconce reveals.

*The 'panic broadcast' may be as much a function of fantasy as fact," writes Northwestern's Jeffrey Sconce in Haunted Media, suggesting that the panic myth is a function of simple displacement: It's not the Martians invading Earth that we fear, he argues; it's ABC, CBS, and NBC invading and colonizing our consciousness that truly frightens us. To Sconce, the panic plays a "symbolic function" for American culture—we retell the story because we need a cautionary tale about the power of media*

- Slate

A longing for an alternate reality is, thus, partly a consequence of collapsed realities. It is a pastime that has its roots in crisis, as much as it does in the aspiration to transcend. Indeed, the two may be closely connected, but this is also what makes VR a risky proposition. This crisis may have many facets, but includes the abundance of digital mobile experience and the search for a new interface. And here we see other endeavours that respond to this, such as Google Glass.

## 2016: POKEMON AND THE PURSUIT OF ALTERNATE REALITIES

I wish to conclude this inquiry by drawing on the idea that virtual reality resonates with our desire to inhabit other stories – not so much other worlds. The idea of inhabiting is critical here, but is also follows from the principle of having to become better story-tellers. The idea of inhabiting stories also makes a crucial distinction between the desire we may have to put ourselves into a new reality, and the desire to be someone different within a completely different story.

As with great literature, or great film, what we want from VR is the chance to have lived a different life, to imagine ourselves as another kind of person, to break the monotony of our continuity and to step outside of all those dimensions that constrain our capacity to be somebody else. This is also why it is important that role adoption is designed into VR experiences. Helping the user understand that it is not simply them in this world, but that they are somebody else, is what makes it especially exciting.

And yet, virtual realities are also a manifestation of the capacity of our imagination. It is not that the capacity to imagine distinguishes us as a species, but our capacity to create objects that depict our imagination is, in some respects, the definition of history. And this is why VR is here to stay.

We will not cease in our aspiration to re-make history through the most imaginative means and whether it is the printed press, the design of the ball point pen, or the creation of a virtual reality headset, the pursuit of VR is her to stay, in large part because it has always been a part of our lives.

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