Chapter 1
Virtual Futures:
A Manifesto for Immersive Experiences

Julia Scott-Stevenson
University of the West of England, UK

ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the author explores how immersive media experiences might lend themselves to examinations of pathways to a preferred future. After surveying a number of immersive media projects—some that have dealt with environmental and social issues and some on broader topics—the author identifies a number of affordances of the form. These affordances are crafted into a ‘virtual futures manifesto’, or a set of guidelines for the commissioning and creation of such works. The manifesto points include 1) stage an encounter; 2) be wild: bewilderment is powerful; 3) move from being to doing; 4) embody the future; and 5) care: the participants matter. It is hoped that immersive media experiences that consider these points may assist audiences in imagining pathways to preferred futures.

INTRODUCTION

There is significant hyperbole around immersive media technologies, for instance relating to claims around empathy, behavioral change and bias reduction. In parallel, a commonly heard concern is that digital media technologies distract us, take us out of the ‘here and now’—affixing our attention to a mobile phone perhaps, or isolating us behind a head mounted display.

Notwithstanding these fraught debates, it seems clear that one of the affordances of immersive media, and virtual reality (VR) in particular, is the creation of a sense of presence, of ‘being there.’ So why take a user out of the ‘here and now’ and attempt to situate her somewhere else? One reason is to take her somewhere she cannot otherwise go. Some creators use it to visit someone or something lost or past (see for instance Vestige VR (2018), about the creator’s late husband, or historical pieces like Immersive Histories: Dam Busters (2018)) or to venture inside another’s mind (Manic VR, 2018). Some explore future worlds (Biidaaban: First Light, 2018), or visit remote places that demonstrate the impacts of the anthropocene (Sanctuaries of Silence, 2018). Many future narratives, though, across multiple screen
media forms, tend to be dystopian in flavor. Here, my focus is on what might be termed preferred futures—what is a future we want to get to? What is the world we want to make?

To investigate this idea further, I devised the following research question:

Might there be possibilities within immersive media for creating shared experiences that imagine pathways towards a preferred future?

I undertook a survey of existing media works across VR/AR/immersive experiences, and began to identify a number of themes. Rapidly I realized that, in fact, what I was developing was a manifesto—in other words, a set of guiding principles for the development of immersive projects. These principles are particularly relevant for those that want to explore preferred futures, but are likely useful for those making other kinds of stories as well. In writing an immersion manifesto, I’m in the esteemed company of Kat Cizek (2016) and Janet H. Murray (2016), whose earlier manifestos also propose approaches to immersive media, but are more focused on VR and its relationship with film; while this manifesto explores a broader category of immersive media and responds to more recent works.

VIRTUAL FUTURES MANIFESTO

Stage an Encounter

See Also: Connection, conversation

I had a wonderful, transcendent experience in The Collider (2018), an immersive installation by creative duo Anagram, in its showing at IDFA DocLab in Amsterdam. In The Collider, two participants enter ‘the machine’—a connecting series of tiny rooms—via separate doors, while wearing headphones relaying a voiceover track. I entered one door, and undertook a series of actions as instructed by the voice, then moved into a second room, donned a VR headset, and then my fellow participant entered and used the hand controllers to guide what I was seeing. We went on to undertake a series of sensory interactions in very close quarters.

The most intriguing part of the experience was the curated encounter with another person, whom I had not met until that moment. In this way, the work differed from many immersive experiences that attempt to create a sense of embodiment of another. There are a number of ethical conundrums apparent in claiming to develop empathy by enabling the user to walk in another’s shoes, as while we might have the feeling that we are experiencing another’s existence, we cannot really or fully know their lived experience (Nash, 2018). With an encounter, the user is not trying to be someone else; she is instead going to meet them for a while. Most of the immersive experiences that led to this understanding enabled an encounter with another human being—but perhaps we could have an encounter with ourselves? Or possibly even an encounter with the natural world?

Following a conversation with my boss, Professor Mandy Rose, I borrowed the idea of encounter from the philosopher Levinas. Levinas (1969) noted that an ethical encounter with another recognizes their infinity—that is, the complexity of that person, and an understanding that we will never fully know their entirety. Levinas also noted that in representing others, we run the risk of instead totalizing them—of suggesting that the incomplete picture we present is, in fact, all there is to them. Consider, for instance, stories of people with disabilities. It can often be the case that the story of their disability is presented as the only story they have, ignoring the individual’s great complexity of being and of experience. So by crafting an encounter with another, instead of attempting to represent another or to have the user ‘be’
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