Marketing Virtual Reality Experiences… Without the Headset: Watching, Playing and Fearing Anagram's *Goliath*

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Abstract

If the immersive sector is to capture new audiences from different corners of the cultural landscape, then gateway promotional content is needed – that is, marketing that engages those new to immersive technologies. Is it possible, however, to promote the unique pleasures that Virtual Reality (VR) offers without putting people in headsets? Exploring this question, this article outlines research that experiments with new ways of marketing VR experiences based on applying theoretical concepts to a marketing campaign for Goliath, a 2021 VR documentary produced by Anagram.

The campaign tested out Baekdal's characterisation of two 'moments' of a VR experience: (1) a 'macro moment', which is experiencing VR yourself in a headset; and (2) a 'micro moment', which is presenting VR to people without a headset and whom prefer watching others in a VR environment rather participating in it themselves. This article argues that audiences new to VR are more likely to be engaged by promotion for VR if it presents a 'micro moment' of VR based on watching other people. We outline ways that the immersive sector can produce marketing for VR that better communicates not just what a VR experience is, but also what its audiences are expected to do.

Keywords

Virtual Reality; Promotion; Marketing; Immersive Technologies; Immersive Audiences.

Introduction

The immersive market is growing at a fast pace, reaching £100 billion in 2020, yet questions still remain over the mass-market potential of Virtual Reality (VR). As things stand in 2021, approximately 4% of UK internet users own a VR headset (Allen & Freeman, 2021). Most of these headsets are ones involving a mobile phone (mobile VR or Google Cardboard). 1.7% of UK internet users are understood to own a high-end VR headset, including Oculus Quest, Oculus Rift and HTC Vive (ibid.). This means that over a million UK residents own a high-end VR headset in 2021 (1,067,508 people). According to analysis firm Omdia, Oculus has a market share of 48%, meaning there are circa. half a million Quest Go and Rift owners in the UK. The available data on Quest owners in the UK specifically is limited, but using various industry data sources, it can be estimated that 65% of these devices are Quests, meaning there are around 300,000 Oculus Quest owners currently in the UK (307,442 to be specific) (ibid.).

Altogether, such data, while encouraging, highlights VR's ongoing struggle to break into the mainstream. According to the *Culture is Digital* report commissioned by the Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, 'immersive is changing the way in which we are able to experience the world around us, offering a particular opportunity as international demand is increasing' (2018). Moreover, research conducted by GlobalWebIndex in 2018 revealed that over 90% of UK and US audiences are aware of VR (Buckle, 2018). Yet these awareness figures stand in sharp contrast to the rate of audiences who are actually consuming VR content on a regular basis. In response, this article outlines collaborative, industry-engaged research that aimed to create and evaluate new promotional strategies for how today's VR experiences can be better marketed to first-time VR audiences. 'From both social and commercial perspectives,' Catherine Allen writes, 'we have to reach beyond those very important early adopters, and convince broader audiences that these magical, enriching digital experiences are simply too good to miss out on' (2020). For as Allen and Dan Tucker (2018: 6) stated in the *Immersive Content Formats for Future Audiences* report: 'We want to begin to establish a language that has not been directly imported from other forms of media, but instead is unique and bespoke to immersive content as an industry in its own right'.

If immersive media is to be seen on its own terms, then, it needs its own terms – and that also goes for its marketing, which has been identified as one of the immersive sector's biggest challenges in terms of growth (Brigante and Elger, 2020). The challenge is partly a creative one: how can the immersive sector properly communicate the often magical qualities of liminality, presence and embodiment at the heart of all good VR experiences without putting people in headsets? As famed VR director Mathias Chelebourg discusses:

> 'It is really tricky, because how can you communicate immersion? In some ways we have the same problem that people from the theatre world have: how can you communicate the quality of a play by showing something that is so far away from the actual experience you are going to have? Current practice is to assemble sneak-peek videos, interviews; you have to be very hybrid. I think it is really hard to do; we are all trying to find a solution' (2020).

Similarly, Aki Jarvinen, a Senior Experience Researcher at Digital Catapult, states that 'immersive productions are challenging to market due to their experiential nature' (2020: 9). Until now, there has been a lack of research into immersive promotion, beyond analysing VR as promotional extensions of other media, like film (see Janes, 2019). What is missing here is an understanding of how we can design promotion for immersive content *in the first place*.

This challenge is also a cultural one: so much of today's marketing for VR tends to consist of fairly unengaging and non-descript stock images of people standing in headsets, often lacking

in any real sense of what it is (see Freeman et al., 2021). Likely because of such uninspired stock imagery, audience research conducted by Limina Immersive in 2020 indicated that many audiences still conceive of the primary audience for VR in terms of stereotypical – and typically gendered – imagery, such as visions of far-off science-fiction technology and, most problematically, a strict association with male-dominated gaming media (Allen, 2020). If VR is to truly capture mass audiences and become an equal to, say, streaming Netflix, then more gateway promotional content is needed – that is, marketing that engages those new to VR.

However, creating marketing content for VR that engages those new to VR is not easy. This is a very hybridised form – a blend of film and video game, but also theatre and even theme park. VR is a visceral medium, too, one that, at its best, is known to incite emotions of empathy (Milk, 2015) and awe (Quesnel, 2018), but is otherwise predicated on the ability for technology to create three-dimensional 'wrap-around sensory experiences' (Dovey, 2019).

But to what extent does the marketing for VR actually *need* to produce wrap-around sensory experiences? Or to pose the question another way: can these innate VR qualities of visceral three-dimensional space, awe-inspiring imagery and empathy-building digital storytelling be communicated without a VR headset? And might the secret to marketing VR to a broader audience lie in presenting it to them as a 2D experience, where *other* people are the focus? In a promo video for *The War of the Worlds: The Immersive Experience* (2019-), for example, a piece of VR-accompanied immersive theatre, the metaphor of the rollercoaster was used to evoke the emotional sensation of being inside VR. And let's not forget that the video game industry has developed a host of tactics for promoting its products, often without showing actual gameplay footage at all. But immersive audiences are not simply video gamers, nor are they simply theatre-goers; the hybridity at the heart of immersive experiences is cultural as much as technological. As Jarvinen (2020: 19) observes: 'The majority of players of the most successful VR games are not the same audience as for, say, an immersive installation in the Saatchi Gallery. Rather, immersive audiences are festival-goers, tourists, gallery visitors, experimental theatre and secret cinema enthusiasts, video and mobile game players etc.'

Understanding Immersive Audiences: Macro vs. Micro Engagement

Harnessing any kind of new approach to marketing VR experiences, then, first means recognising the complex picture of today's immersive audiences. Aligning VR with a specific medium can create a problem in promotional terms, namely because of the 'baggage' that surrounds that medium, and how this impacts our expectations. For example, if you were to label something as a 'game' or a 'film', or even a 'VR film', then many people will come armed with a particular set of expectations in terms of what said VR film will look like. That kind of shorthand can be useful, but using the 'VR film' label also means that some people will draw on their existing film prejudices when evaluating the VR film. This means that the established register of film becomes the criteria for judging VR. Audience research tells us that people are more likely to dislike something if their expectations are not met. And in the case of VR, these negative responses may stem from game-like or film-like expectations. For example, see the below user review for *Myth: A Frozen Tale* (2020) on the Oculus website:

> 'It's okay but just a few additions could have made it so much better. Add some basic interaction – let me rub the lizard's head and have it react cutely. Let me touch the water horse and cause ripples along its skin. Let the passage of my hands stir the ash floating in the air. It doesn't take much to add to the immersion. Without it the experience feels too passive' (Oculus, 2020).

In response to this question of expectation, let me state the obvious: it is important that the immersive sector recognises that any VR experience is likely to operate on a continuum of, in the simplest sense, film versus game, with degrees of interactivity lessening or increasing depending on the story choices of the designers and the affordances of the technology (see Jensen, 1998; Westling, 2020). Now for a less obvious proposition: producing marketing content that effectively communicates the uniqueness of VR experiences while at the same time clearly signalling what the experience actually *is* and what audiences are expected to *do* means establishing a promotional language for VR that distinguishes watching from playing.

Allow me to explain. Thomas Baekdal, a media analyst and author on various topics of digital transformation, identifies the 'viewing' of a VR experience as an emerging trend, particularly across the gaming sector. Here, the focus is not on trying to get people to buy or even experience VR themselves, but instead on watching other people interact within a virtual environment. Consider the two ways in which we might experience a video game:

> 'One way is to play the game yourself, which is really fun if that's what you want to do. But the other way is to watch someone else play the game, through which you experience their emotions and actions. Why would people want to spend time watching someone else play a game, you ask? Oh, I don't know. Why do you watch football on TV? It's the same thing. Millions of people watch football on TV almost every week, but most people don't actually play it themselves. This is what we call *let's players*' (2017).

Baekdal's 'let's player' concept leads him to characterising two modes of VR experience: (1) a *macro moment*, i.e., for experiencing VR yourself in a headset; and (2), a *micro moment*, i.e., for presenting VR experiences to people without a VR headset. Unpacking these two modes a little, on the one hand we could choose to define the idea of a VR experience in terms of the active participant, where the immersive sector aims to convince people to put on a headset and interact in the VR world themselves. But equally, a VR experience could be defined in terms of Baekdal's VR micro moment concept, where the audience is not wearing a VR headset. Instead, this market is about how we can show a VR experience to a non-VR viewer – catering for people interested in watching, not playing (also see Breel, 2020). For example, film-goers may be less accustomed to using controllers than gamers, and generally are used to consuming stories where they merely observe. Managing the expectations of a VR gamer and a VR film-goer are thus very different propositions that marketers must recognise.

In this vein, Dolan and Parets (2016) have neatly categorised differences in terms of the level of audience agency within immersive experiences, identifying the following four categories:

1. *Passive observant*: The viewer is essentially a ghost, playing no active role in the story. They are invisible to (and go unnoticed by) other actors in the world.
2. *Active observant*: As with passive observant, but with some additional means of interaction such as a gaze-based point-and-click mechanic to activate cut-scenes.
3. *Passive participant*: The viewer is visible to (and noticed by) other actors in the world. The viewer may be spoken to or directly addressed by other actors. The overall experience however remains passive; the viewer has no ability to affect change within the story. (Limina found this category to be the most popular).
4. *Active participant*: As with passive participants, but with the means and ability to effect change within the story and its outcome.

What, then, might a marketing campaign look like that aims to test out Baekdal's concept of a 'micro VR moment', i.e. conceiving of the target audience as a 'let's player' who finds pleasure in watching someone else (i.e. a passive observant) rather than playing themselves (i.e. an active participant)? How might Baekdal's concept translate into promotion for a VR experience? And to what extent might adopting the micro approach to VR promotion provide a wider array of audiences with access to VR experiences that they might otherwise not have?

To put it simply: how might we create a marketing campaign for a VR experience that, on the one hand, experiments with new ways of promoting VR as a macro experience, potentially encouraging audiences to purchase a VR headset, while, on the other hand, also promotes VR as a micro experience, one based on watching others interact within the VR environment? And to be clear: this is not about building marketing campaigns constructed entirely out of immersive technology, though there is a place for that: market research tells us that products that include augmented reality (AR) within their marketing have been known to show as much as a 94% higher conversion rate than for products without AR (Papagiannia, 2020). Instead, this is about how the affordances and values of immersive technology can be better communicated to audiences, developing a promotional language for the immersive sector.

Methodology

In order to address this challenge, the Immersive Promotion Design team – a new research-led marketing consultancy company for the immersive sector led by the author (see www.immersivepromotion.com) – conducted a wealth of research, drawing together sector reports and conducting interviews with industry professionals, in particular those based in VR and digital marketing. This research was about understanding the challenges surrounding marketing VR experiences to those who have never experienced it before. We combined this research with academic literature reviews, spanning areas of immersive and emerging technology, promotion and marketing, and (trans)media communication. This work allowed us to better understand academic ideas of the 'let's player', participation, agency, and other concepts related to micro versus macros VR engagement. Alongside an analysis of other examples of VR promotion that allowed us to gauge current promotional conventions across the UK immersive sector, we then categorised today's technology-based immersive content, identifying ways of visualising or communicating such concepts on promotional platforms.

From there, we drew on existing audience insight data about how audiences respond to VR experiences, and in particular what peopled articulate as most enjoyable and valuable, as well as how they articulated their interest in being either the lead site of agency within the experience or whether playing more of an observational role was preferable to some people. This audience insight data was gathered through StoryFutures Academy as part of their now-published 'Immersive Audiences Report' (Bennett et al, 2021), the Research England-funded South West Creative Technology Network (see 'Framing Immersion', 2019), and bespoke consultancy with Limina Immersive, a UK-leader in immersive audience insight, altogether providing us with a strong snapshot of the UK immersive sector's emerging audiences.

All of this subsequently informed and underpinned a set of marketing materials prototyped for *Goliath: Playing With Reality*, a 2021 VR documentary produced by Anagram. Since our marketing was in this case devised as an research project rather than as an official campaign, we were free from commercial constraints, able to test out research concepts, and to produce a set of materials that could experiment rigorously but creatively with multiple ways of engaging different kinds of audiences, including those who were completely new to VR.

Finally, having prototyped our promotional materials, we evaluated all of the promotional materials with real audiences. The evaluation occurred in two ways: first, via an online survey conducted through Survey Monkey; and second, via follow-on focus groups conducted with our key demographics. I stress again that our promotional content was not designed to be *Goliath*'s final marketing, but was instead devised as an R&D project that aimed to reveal new practical insights that could be shared with the immersive sector. This research was funded by StoryFutures Academy through their 'Train the Trainer' programme.

Case Study: Anagram's *Goliath: Playing With Reality*

Goliath: Playing With Reality (*Goliath* hereafter) is a VR documentary about living through 'real virtual realities'. It follows the story of a devoted gamer diagnosed with schizophrenia. Audiences are invited into the protagonist's two very different worlds. One world is that of psychosis, where he is tormented by visions and voices. In the other world, he is a hero, surrounded by the voices of the community of gamers who bring joy and adventure into his life. As we move through his two worlds, both of them beyond real, a sleight of hand invites the audience to question how they construct their own reality – and whether they can trust it. *Goliath* explores themes of alternative realities and social relationships through a positive reflection on gaming in the face of adverse life events. The project began as a 2019 phase two project funded by CreativeXR and StoryFutures, and launched on Oculus Quest in late 2021. Anagram is an award-winning, female-led creative studio based in Bristol, UK. Its team specialises in thought-provoking interactive storytelling and immersive experience design.

Our prototype campaign, titled 'Where Am I?', takes audiences on a hero's journey, one that shifts the perspective as we transition from the world of the protagonist's schizophrenic mind to his escapist world of online gaming – shifting from the point of view of a character, to avatars, to the audience. This perspective shifting is thematically appropriate to the story of *Goliath*, but it also provided a way of switching between macro and micro moments of VR, allowing us to evaluate which of these approaches engaged different kinds of audiences, and whether or not these two approaches could work together in the same marketing campaign. Altogether, we produced videos, an avatar creation app, mobile wallpapers, and an AR filter.

1. Videos

Where, then, did we start? Our background research showed that the 16-24 demographic – itself *Goliath*'s primary target audience – is most comfortable consuming immersive content at home, associating VR experiences with a safe, familiar space (Whittaker, 2019). As such, for the first phase of our marketing campaign, we chose a promotional platform accessible for home consumption: video. Specifically, we created a prototype trailer and four accompanying short videos. These videos essentially began our hero's journey, with a character struggling to cope in his world of schizophrenia before entering a vibrant new world of online gaming, only to then complicate the distinctness of this new reality across the subsequent videos.

For this first phase of the campaign, the perspective is from *Goliath*'s unnamed protagonist. The videos were designed to appeal to film-goers, i.e., are narrative-orientated and provide no opportunity for the audience to play any role other than a passive observant. In other words, the videos depict VR as being a *micro moment*, with the audience watching a character move through a story. Thematically, however, the video aimed to communicate what is arguably one of VR's most unique affordances: that it offers new ways of seeing the world around you.

What do I mean by this? Duncan Speakman argues that we should rethink our understanding of immersive technologies by shifting the emphasis towards the ways that these technologies allow us to become more aware of what we are already immersed in: 'Immersive media is a way of exposing how we exist deep inside the tangled ecologies of [the world] rather than external viewers' (2020). Explains Speakman:

> 'Immersion … might in one instance conjure images of being underwater and in another reading a book. It might mean being immersed in a task or immersed in the invisible microwaves of digital networks. Yet when we talk about immersive media it often feels there is a lean towards describing a kind of cocooning. Whether that's a darkened room filled with sound or the forward-looking and body-forgetting embrace of a VR headset, it's often a totality – immersive media meaning something where the media itself is all-encompassing in some way, where the only "thing" you are immersed in is the work' (2020).

Speakman's definition of immersive technologies means communicating VR as 'not just that you are "in" something', but as that which 'highlights, reveals or creates one or more of the multiple layers of things we are already immersed in' (ibid.). Understanding immersive experiences as connections with the world has been reinforced by the 'visual findings' from the South West Creative Technology Network's 'Immersion' strand, too, which ultimately discovered 'the capacity for immersive technologies to reveal things you cannot see, and the implications of that function. This unique ability for immersive technologies to reveal new perspectives can extend to personal, human connections, and insight' (SWCTN, 2019).

As such, our video promotion for *Goliath* as a VR experience sought to communicate a dialogue between the virtual and the real world, inviting audiences to question their own reality. For example, our trailer video morphs in and out of different realities, moving through doorways as if they are mere digital realms; physical rooms flicker between a realistic aesthetic and one resembling a game design (Fig.1). The trailer includes multiple portals and magical doorways into alternate worlds (Fig.2), with our accompanying videos – themselves intended for a platform such as Twitch – blending these alternate realities together (Fig.3). Immersive's noted ability to reveal new perspectives or layers of reality about our everyday world is also signalled through our use of language, with the trailer video asking: "Up to 40% of people with schizophrenia are untreated. Many more choose to live in alternative realities. Where are YOU right now?"

Figure 1: Prototype trailer, produced by Immersive Promotion Design, 2021

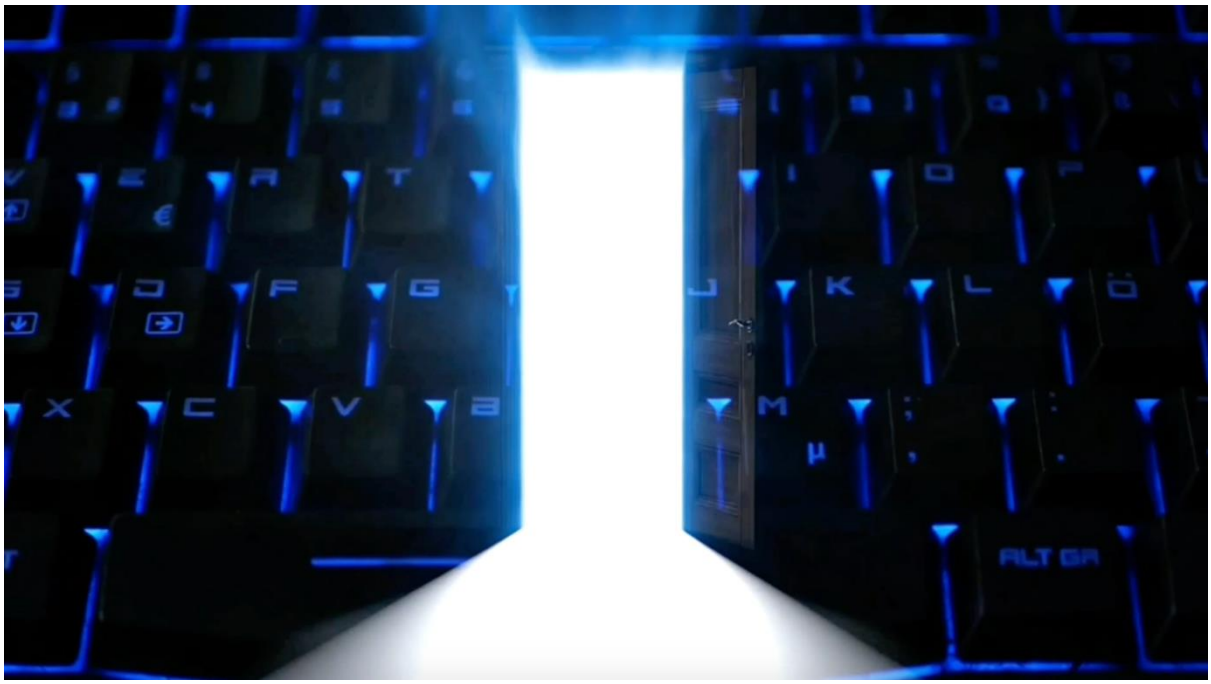

Figure 2: Prototype trailer, produced by Immersive Promotion Design, 2021

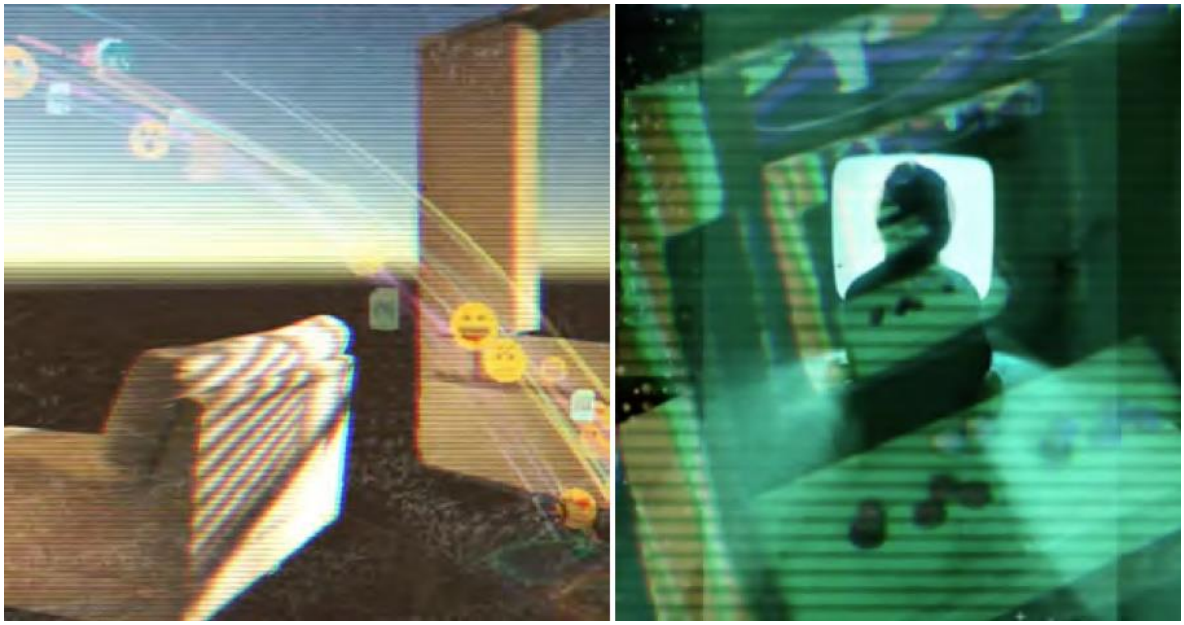

Figure 3: Prototype Twitch videos, produced by Immersive Promotion Design, 2021

2. Avatars and mobile wallpapers

For the second phase of the campaign, the perspective shifts from the central protagonist to that of an avatar, representing the second part of our hero's journey as the main character takes ownership of his life in the gaming world by becoming something else. The videos may have shown that the protagonist's two worlds – his real world of schizophrenic struggle and his online world of gaming joy – are not separate but instead blur into each other, but our second phase of promotion took the form of a digital avatar creation tool that invites users to consider in which reality they wish to live – and how a digital version of themselves might shape that decision. The avatar tool was just a prototype, but would allow users to explore a range of game-like characters, costumes and props, building an avatar to their liking (Fig.4).

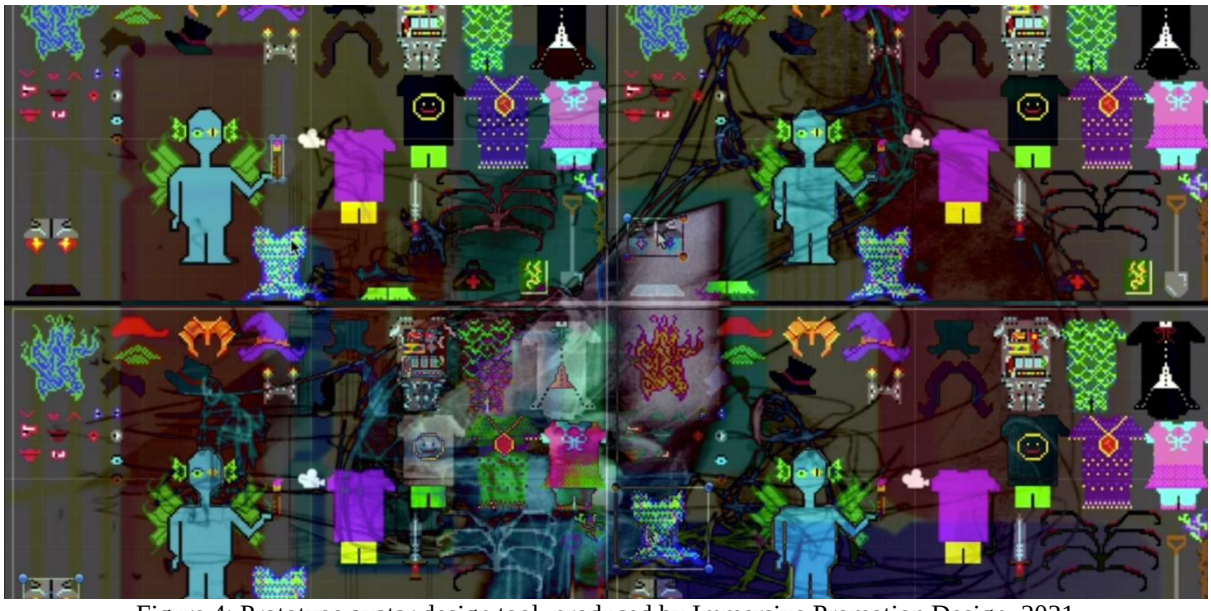

Figure 4: Prototype avatar design tool, produced by Immersive Promotion Design, 2021

The avatar design tool is intended to promote another of VR's most unique affordances – that it can offer new forms connection with other people, and even a new mode of interaction that changes the relationship with an audience (see 'Framing Immersion', 2019). The idea that

VR represent a paradigm shift from storytelling to 'story-living' has been well-discussed (see Fromm, 2018; Golding, 2018). Any form of media is likely to show us the world, or a representation of a world, but can it always show us as *part* of that world, shaped by our interactions with others? There is merit in understanding VR not in cinematic or even strictly visual terms, but as something more spatial and architectural, which lends itself to questions of intersubjective relationships – even if these relationships are between yourself and your avatar. With VR experiences, for example, sometimes this means that performers and audiences can share a personal and intimate moment of interaction together, while in some cases the technology is capable of mediating relationships between multiple audiences and non-live characters.

Importantly, we thus shift the perspective here towards a complete *hybrid* of Baekdal's micro and macro VR moments: simultaneously the user is both a 'let's player' who finds pleasure in watching someone else (i.e. a passive observant, perceiving the actions of an alien avatar) and an active player within the world of *Goliath*, participating as themselves while building new relationships with their own avatar self. Further reinforcing this strange melding together of Baekdal's micro and macro VR moments, and itself reflecting the blended realities at the heart of *Goliath*, binaural sound is used to make users feel like they are not a 'let's player' at all, but are instead immersed inside their own fantasy. Echoes of voices are heard, seemingly bouncing around the room, which present the illusion that the user is inside a 'real virtual reality'. Our accompanying mobile wallpapers then ask users to choose in which 'real virtual reality' they wish to live: a reality-blended game world or a game-blended real world (Fig.5).

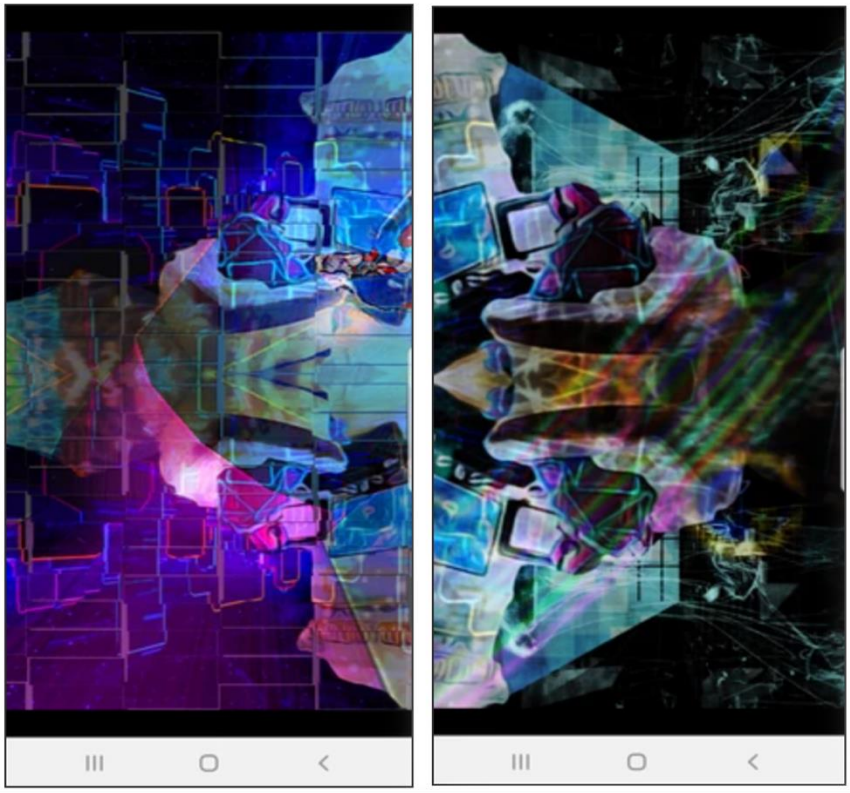

Figure 5: Prototype mobile wallpapers, produced by Immersive Promotion Design, 2021

3. AR filter

For the third and final phase of the campaign, we prototyped an AR filter. Notably, the perspective shifts again, this time to that of the individual audience member, as the user is able to enter the fictional game world of *Goliath* – not as the central protagonist, not even as

his avatar, but as themselves, wearing a VR headset (Fig.6). In other words, our AR filter was designed to be a promotional bridge to what Baekdal calls a *macro VR moment*, albeit one that is fully accessible via a user's phone rather than requiring the use of a VR headset.

IMAGE REDACTED DUE TO PERMISSIONS ISSUE

Figure 6: [REDACTED DUE TO PERMISSIONS ISSUE]

Thematically, the filter communicates the sensibility that we do not need our avatar after all because we are all already living in a mixed reality of both physical and virtual. The decision to produce this filter was based on our sector-wide audience insight, which showed that, of all the immersive platforms available (e.g., 360-video, VR, AR, MR), *Goliath*'s target audience of 16-24s are most used to engaging with AR filters on their mobile phone (Whittaker, 2019).

But this decision was also about experimenting with ways of promoting another of VR's most unique affordances – that it is capable of providing a truly personal experience. In effect, immersive technologies place audiences in the middle of complex virtual-physical entanglements, and this cannot help but privilege a visceral, highly personal response – forming a liminal experience for the individual that captures a sense of leaving one space behind but not yet fully entering another. By way of example, *Ready Player One* (2018), a film set in 2045 about a virtual reality entertainment universe called OASIS, narrativises the value of such a personal virtual world. 'These days,' asserts protagonist Wade Watts, 'reality is a bummer. Everyone's looking for a way to escape.' The film's virtual world of OASIS, 'a place where the limits of reality are your own imagination, [where] you can do anything, go anywhere', is a space that allows Wade to find the answers to his own profound questions. It is in the OASIS where Wade discovers clues to solving the mystery of his virtual world, but immersive media's potential to reveal things that you otherwise cannot see also means that Wade's immersion enables him to understand his need to live in a video game, and how his behaviour in said video game enables and prevents the forming of meaningful relationships. Indeed, it is through action in the virtual world of OASIS that Wade forms his strongest personal relationships, both with his best friend and his romantic feelings towards Samantha. Equally, it is Wade's claim that 'people come to the OASIS because of all the things they can do, but they stay because of all the things they can be' that crystallises the allure of VR.

Visceral, personal freedom also emerges from the surrounding space. As Speakman described earlier when conceptualising VR as that which 'highlights, reveals or creates one or more of the multiple layers of things we are already immersed in' (2020), a VR experience cares where it is. Seeing something like a painting in a VR recreation of a 16th century chapel will no doubt create a particular effect on those who see it. Seeing it in an art gallery via AR will create a different effect, as would seeing the same painting, again via AR, but in your living room. This relationship between place and immersive technologies opens up promotional thinking to that which extends beyond the point that someone decides to put on a headset. If immersive experiences are to truly sew people into a world in a dynamic way, then we must think of them as being more than short-lived VR content, and instead as an all-encompassing, mood-changing way of life that engages audiences before and after the experience itself.

Hence our promotional AR filter for *Goliath*, which works to direct audiences towards the full *Goliath* VR experience on Oculus by transforming the user's familiar home environment into a three-dimensional virtual setting wherein a game world, a focus on the individual user, and indeed the user's wearing of a VR headset all become a dynamic, normalised experience.

Audience Evaluation

In order to evaluate to what extent the most unique affordances and qualities of VR could be communicated via promotional content without needing to put people in VR headsets, and whether or not the key to marketing VR to new audiences is in presenting it in 2D form, we tested our promotional content on audiences. Since our marketing was devised as an research project rather than as an official campaign running live, we could not engage in any kind ethnographic activities, such as to track audience participation across the promotional content or to see how they engaged with the various materials on a day-to-day basis. Instead, then, a panel of 437 people (working across a range of sectors) experienced our prototype marketing materials before completing a survey. A sample of 25% of this panel then participated in follow-on focus groups. Some of our panel had experienced VR before, but, reflecting the general population, many of them had not. Survey participants were shown each of our marketing materials in the order outlined in this article, which represents the order they would have been released had the content been made public. All 437 participants were approached on a market research basis, i.e. it was explained upfront what the aims of the research are and that their feedback was about supporting immersive audience development.

Across our survey and focus groups, we aimed to evaluate the following three questions:

1. Based only on engaging with our *Goliath* promotional materials, to what extent were respondents clear about what *Goliath* actually is, and specifically that it is VR?
2. What is the relationship between respondents' engagement/familiarity with VR and whether micro or macro models of VR primed their interest in *Goliath* the most?
3. To what extent was the enthusiasm or reservations for *Goliath* linked to familiarity with VR and respondents' preference for micro/macro modes of VR engagement?

In terms of the first question, there were very few people who did not want to experience *Goliath* – only 12.4%. However, the most common response was 'Maybe'. This indicates a degree of uncertainty about what the experience is. For instance, one respondent said they 'don't really understand the concept fully', whilst another said 'it doesn't give a specified description of the product'. It is worth noting here that the majority of these participants rarely or never use VR. People who had never engaged with VR before were more likely to be unsure about whether or not they wanted to experience *Goliath*. Overall, however, 68% of our respondents stated that they felt clear about what *Goliath* is. And they were all loosely correct, using one or more of the following phrases in their description of what they expected *Goliath* to be: 'technology experience/new technology', 'interactive', 'immersive', 'virtual reality', 'augmented reality' or a 'unique way of exploring issues such as schizophrenia'.

Another notable trend in terms of those most likely to want to experience *Goliath* concerned their profession: 83% of our respondents who work in the media said they would like to experience *Goliath*. This is perhaps no surprise as it follows the trend: many early adopters for VR have been people who work in the media (Allen and Tucker, 2018). This industry slant feels neither positive nor negative, but it does flag that in order to reach broader audiences, like those working in retail or education, for example, more work is needed.

More promising are the findings from the second of our evaluation questions, where there was a clear pattern in terms of how familiar or not respondents where with VR and which of the micro/macro models of VR promotion engaged them the most. The videos were by far the most popular of our marketing assets amongst those participants who rarely or never engage with VR, with 64% finding these promotional videos the most engaging – regardless of whether they wanted to experience *Goliath* or not. The reasons for this are likely the simple familiarity of the video medium, helping to counteract VR's strange mystique. The video content was also the most straightforward to access, fitting into existing lifestyle habits. But focus group discussion highlighted that our positioning of these videos as *micro VR moments*, i.e., as more traditionally narrative-based artefacts that still signalled the unique quality of VR though imagery of portals and blended, distorted realities, was key to this popularity. On the other end of the scale, those respondents with little to no experience of VR were least engaged by our avatar creation app (8%) – a tool designed to be a hybrid of Baekdal's macro and micro conceptions of VR, encouraging a far more active and participatory role for the user, but doing so with a degree of spectatorship that privileged both playing and watching.

Comparing these findings to those respondents who regularly experience VR, it is striking that the opposite promotional materials were deemed to be the most engaging. Amongst this group, 60% responded most favourably to our AR filter – a platform very much designed to present a *macro VR moment*, one that places the individual user at the centre of a personal, fully participatory virtual-physical entanglement. For those respondents with regular access to VR, indeed, it was our micro-themed videos that were least popular (engaging just 15%).

Finally, as for the question of whether our respondents' enthusiasm or concern for *Goliath* was linked to their prior familiarity with VR, once again an interesting pattern emerged. Generally, those who were completely new to VR were most enthusiastic about the potential of the technology ('Possibility of an immersive experience' / 'a totally new experience'), indicating that our promotion had been largely effective at communicating VR's most unique emotional qualities. At the same time, those new to VR were most overtly concerned about the psychological impact of the experience: 'Effects on those with mental health issues' / 'It may get people lost (in a limbo between the real world and gaming)'. This enthusiasm for VR technology combined with caution over its perceived psychological effects was in fact shared by 79% of this group. Remembering that this group's favoured promotional materials had been the more film-like videos (i.e., the micro conception of watching others in VR), it is apparent that these respondents were expressing the sorts of claims and concerns that video games have been long associated with (Newman, 2008; 2012).

Conclusion

Generally, current approaches to marketing VR are often based on images that emphasise the technology of a VR headset, rather than the experience *inside* the VR headset. Creating more accessible, audience-widening marketing for VR must start with a defined understanding of not just what a VR experience *is*, but also what it requires of audiences. Many audiences new to VR will be apprehensive about being asked to immerse themselves in a virtual world – an apprehension that is likely to stem from the duality of seemingly occupying two spaces at once. As Catherine Allen (2016) explains, 'there is a great mental and physical transition that users go through to submit to a VR experience. Studies have shown that participating in something that warps your sense of reality engages the parts of your brain where memories are created'. For Anagram, too, 'most projects made for VR … imagine that an audience is always ready to make the leap of imagination – to let go. But the audience often feels a dislocation, and does not want to submit to an unfamiliar immersion' (Rose, 2019).

So, what did we learn from prototyping our research-informed promotional content for Anagram's *Goliath*, and testing it on audiences? On the one hand, our audience insight reveals that those completely new to VR tended to favour promotional content that was more film-like in its aesthetic – presenting a micro VR moment based on watching other people and merely being a passive observant. This makes sense, since a film-like aesthetic is very familiar and minimises uncertainty and potential apprehension ahead of taking an unfamiliar leap into an unknown immersive environment. And indeed, those who regularly experienced VR tended to favour promotional content that was game-like in its aesthetic – presenting a macro VR moment based on playing the role of an active participant. On the other hand, these insights can be used as the basis for how to produce marketing content for VR that better signals what the experience *is* and what its audiences are expected to *do*.

For example, as a general rule, the difference between an observant role and a participant role within a VR experience may be signalled to audiences through the degree of interaction required within the promotional content itself. For an experience where the audience is more of a passive observant, then the promotion can be designed to be read/watched/listened to somewhat passively (e.g., our *Goliath* videos), with the promotional content not addressing the audience directly. Whereas if the VR experience expects the audience to be more of a passive participant, then the promotional content can attempt to make the audience visible, either through the use of technologies (e.g., our *Goliath* AR filter) or by addressing them with other personalisation strategies. Equally, if the VR experience demands that audiences be active participants, then the promotional content can build in opportunities for the audience to co-create content and/or effect some degree of change within the promotional campaign (e.g., our avatar design tool), or perhaps by incorporating and championing user-generated content.

All of which suggests that our experiment with creating new ways of marketing VR has made important progress, particularly in terms of understanding not just what audiences want from VR, but also how to effectively adapt its often liminal and embodied qualities into tangible promotional visuals, tools and platforms. There is still much work to do though: the conceptual focus of our research (combined with the fact that our content was not a 'real' campaign, so to speak) meant that we were less concerned with creating suitable call to actions between the different marketing materials, meaning that we could not evaluate the extent to which audiences unfamiliar with VR were motivated to create avatars or adopt the AR filter. Marketing for immersive experiences must itself form a journey into immersion (Freeman et al, 2021), and so more research is needed to develop that kind of immersive user journey on a psychological and emotional level. Indeed, despite research on immersive audiences now starting to emerge (see, for example, the 'Audience of the Future Immersive Audience Journey Report' produced by Digital Catapult in 2020 and the 'Immersive Audiences Report' produced by StoryFutures in 2021), the immersive sector still has a very long way to go before its VR experiences are perceived by all audiences as sharing the same kind of accessibility that we now associate with being immersed in a good book. But steps are thankfully being made to make VR a more inclusive medium (see Allen, 2020), and our research points to the need to establish a new promotional language for VR, one that supports creatives to better communicate with their audiences about the magic of immersive content.

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