



# Virtual Perspective: The Aesthetic Lineages of Immersive Experience ~ Asher Warren

Jul 1, 2018 | Digital Media/Internet, Older Media, Volume 30

**Abstract:** By a number of measures, the latest wave of virtual reality technologies has generated considerable excitement. The 2014 acquisition of Oculus VR by Facebook for \$2 billion (US) offers us one way to quantify this excitement, as does the increasing media coverage of these new technologies. These investments speak to the belief that technological progress (greater processing power, smarter sensors, etc.) might resurrect the dreams of virtual reality that surfaced decades ago. While much attention has been focused on the technologies that might *deliver* immersive experiences, this paper explores the underlying promises of virtual reality themselves within a larger historical and cross-disciplinary context. Drawing on the history of the theatre, this paper considers the aesthetic vision for immersive experience that emerges during the industrial revolution in Wagner's Bayreuth Festspielhaus, and continues today in the experiences curated by contemporary immersive theatre practitioners. It is through the theatre, I argue, that we might better understand the possible future directions of VR, and alternative critical perspectives from which to approach immersive experiences.

## The promise of Virtual Reality: Recent histories

Radical claims often accompany new technologies: they break from the past, provide revolutionary new possibilities and fundamentally shift existing paradigms. Despite such hyperbole, the vast majority of innovations are in fact responsive to the paradigms which have preceded them. This is particularly true of the recent developments in the field of virtual-reality technology. Devices such as the Oculus Rift, HTC Vive, and Sony PlayStation VR exemplify a dramatic shift forward in VR *technology*, yet do not exceed the promises of VR outlined in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In fact, the recent developments do not claim to revolutionise, rather to finally make good on the earlier promises of VR. We might ask, then, what is 'new' about this virtual reality resurgence, and which aspects are carried over from the previous attempts? In this essay, I hope to interrogate this promise, built on a the underlying aesthetic ideal of immersive experience, drawing not only on the history of VR, but a much longer aesthetic genealogy within the theatre. Drawing on analysis of a recent turn toward *immersive* theatre work, I draw attention to the shared focus on creating certain types of experience, in order to argue that the specific techniques of experience commodification these theatrical works employ suggest a series of possible futures for virtual experience economies.



Fig.1 – Heilig's Sensorama, patented in 1962.

Before considering the relationship between virtual reality, the theatre, and experience economies, it is useful to consider what we might term the canonical history of VR, which generally begins after the Second World War. While some acknowledge perspective painting or early Victorian stereoscopes as optical technologies of immersion, most follow Howard Rheingold, who in his influential road-trip history' *Virtual Reality* (1991), identifies film-maker Morton Heilig's *Sensorama* as one of

the earliest VR devices. Heilig's *Sensorama*, patented in 1962 (fig.1), resembled an arcade game, and played a series of short films that gave users a multi-sensory experience. The *Motorcycle* simulation gave viewers an experience of riding a motorbike, simulated through stereoscopic 3D film, stereo sound, physical vibrations felt through the seat and handlebars of the machine, as well as vents which simulated wind, and even carried a number of scents. The *Sensorama*, however, relied on analogue media, and while it offered a detailed multi-sensory experience, it was not *interactive*. It was in 1968, with Ivan Sutherland's "Ultimate Display" project (fig.2), (nicknamed the "Sword of Damocles" due to the requirement that its considerable weight hang from the ceiling), which is arguably the first device to display a three dimensional computer generated environment through a head mounted display. Sutherland's device, built with the help of student Bob Sproull, tracked its users head movements, and the wire-frame model displayed would shift accordingly, providing the wearer with a virtual environment that they might navigate in an intuitive way. With these features, the 'ultimate display' stands as an important and influential precursor to the gamut of contemporary head mounted displays.

While the grandiose name of 'ultimate display' gives some indication of the *promises* of virtual reality, the applications for this head mounted display were primarily utilitarian,

as was the design of the device itself. Rather than displaying an entirely virtual world, the device offered an overlaid (or augmented) reality experience, for simulation and training for both military and civilian aviation. Despite these pragmatic uses, it is worth re-visiting the vision Sutherland offers of the 'ultimate display' at the IFIP Congress in 1965:

The ultimate display would, of course, be a room within which the computer can control the existence of matter. A chair displayed in such a room would be good enough to sit in. Handcuffs displayed in such a room would be confining, and a bullet displayed in such a room would be fatal. (Sutherland, 1965, p. 508).



Fig.2 – Ivan Sutherland's "Ultimate Display", 1968.

While Sutherland draws on the fantasy world of Lewis Carroll's 1865 *Alice in Wonderland* to help explain his vision, the idea of a room where matter itself was controlled by computer would be captured more precisely in the

science fiction world of *Star Trek*, as the holodeck. The holodeck, a room which could simulate reality, would become a common touchstone for the possibilities of VR technology throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, which saw both a growth in VR technologies, and just as importantly, a series of visions for its potential.

As has been well documented, computer scientist and interactive artist Myron W. Krueger had also been developing artificial realities (the term he coined for his own works) since the late 1960s. From his early responsive environment *Glowflow* (1969) to the artificial-reality developed in *Videoplace* (1975), Krueger pursued a different direction to the "face-sucking masks and sensor-laden body-suits" (Rheingold, 1991, p. 115), developing environments that surrounded users, and allows them to interact without encumbrance. In a forward to Michael Heim's collection of essays titled, *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality* (1993), Krueger provides his own expansive vision of VR:

If virtual reality were just another technology, you would not have heard so much about it. However, it is a technology that can be applied to every human activity and can be used to mediate in every human transaction. Since you are completely immersed in the virtual world, virtual reality constitutes a new form of human experience (Krueger, 1993, p. vi).

If there is one figure who might exceed Krueger's claims for the potential for VR, it is Jaron Lanier, who is often credited with coining the term 'virtual reality', and, as founder and CEO of VPL Research, epitomised the excitement surrounding VR in the late 1980s. Lanier was a charismatic and idiosyncratic figure, who excelled in capturing imaginations – particularly those of venture capitalists – with the possibilities of VR. His expansive visions of VR included a world of post-symbolic communication, where language is made redundant, "because as soon as you can change the world in anyway, that is a mode of expression of utter power and eloquence" (in Heilbrun & Stacks, 1989, p. 118). Not only would such a reality enable new collaborations between people, but, offer the possibility for users to engage more directly with computational processing and programming through Lanier's project for an intuitive, visual programming language (hence VPL). As Lanier explains, "I think that it will bring back into western experience something that has been lost...a sense of the shared mystical altered sense of reality" (p.115). Lanier's vision for VR was for a technology that "ceases to be a medium and simply becomes another reality that we can inhabit" (p.115). Media scholars Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin suggest something of this vision in their definition of Virtual Reality as *immersive*, "which means that it is a medium whose purpose is to disappear" (2000 p.21). This experience of *transparent immediacy* (minimising the awareness of technological mediation) demands that a users senses be engaged as closely as possible to daily experience – thus ruptures caused by lag, stutter, unconvincing physics or other anomalies must be minimised or removed. The most recent developments in VR have taken important steps to address many of these *technical* issues, but require powerful computing system to support the processing of detailed virtual world at high frame-rates with complex and responsive movement tracking systems.

One example of a contemporary VR experience is the short documentary *After Solitary* (2017), directed by Cassandra Herrman and Lauren Mucciolo. The film makes use of 'room-scale' device the HTC Vive, where, as Ars Technica writer Sam Machkovech explains, "[v]iewers must coexist with former inmate Kenny Moore in an accurate, inch-by-inch recreation of the cell he called home for many years" (2017 n.p). The film then transports the viewer to another room; Moore's current bedroom. As Machkovech continues, "the size and scale of [the prison cell] echoes in your vision as you hear Moore confess that he doesn't much like to leave this bedroom." *After Solitary* was awarded the Grand Jury Prize at SXSW 2017 for best room-scale VR, and the top prize at the World VR Forum – a recognition of the capacity for VR experiences not just to embellish, but make experiential immersion a central part of its narrative.

On a larger scale, we might also consider the offerings of Melbourne based Zero Latency. Opening in late 2015, Zero Latency offers participants a multi-player VR gaming experience within a specifically built, 400 square metre, roam-able environment. Through the use of wireless VR equipment, participants can physically move around to explore a virtual space together, complete with digital enemies to eradicate and puzzles to solve. As Broadsheet reviewer Madeleine Laing describes the experience: "[y]our brain gets tricked enough that you feel like you're experiencing something mildly dangerous and exciting" (2017 n.p). Time Out Melbourne writer Adam Jones reports a similar experience, describing it as a "marvel" noting how "[t]hrough in-game prompts and

trickery, players can actually walk upwards of one kilometre back and forth through the warehouse without hitting a wall" (2017 n.p.). On the *Fodder for Thought* blog, 'Fodder' writes of their experience:

in some parts of the game, the group splits up, and so even though you're all still in the same space, it really does feel like you're in [a] different area to the other group... even though they were still on the same floor as you, I think my mind tricked itself into thinking their voices were coming from up higher. (Fodder 2017 n.p.)

While 'Fodder' also describes a number of limitations that held back the experience from being one of total immersion, the focus in all three reviews was the *trickery*, the sensory slight of hand, as it were, that was able to provide enough connection between a *visual* representation and the movement of players bodies to create, as 'Fodder' notes, an illusion convincing enough to begin influencing their *other* senses. In other words, these experiences demonstrate how contemporary VR experiences have moved a step closer the ultimate goal of total immersion.

## The aesthetic promise of immersion

The vision of an immersive media, erasing all traces of its means of production is emblematic, but not necessarily specific to the digital VR devices. Michael Heim, in *The Metaphysics of VR*, attempts to uncover the underlying 'essence of VR', the "inner spirit, the cultural motor that propels the technology" (Heim, 1993, p. 121). Heim begins by suggesting two recent cultural motors: the first, William Gibson's evocative description in *Neuromancer* of cyberspace – a collective hallucination one might 'plug-in' to, and second, the holodeck envisioned in *Star Trek*. However, these are stepping stones to an essence Heim traces back much further, to a much more mystic and religious roots. As he writes,

Rather than control or escape or entertain or communicate, the ultimate promise of VR may be to transform, to redeem our awareness of reality... VR promises not a better vacuum cleaner or a more engrossing communications medium or even a friendlier computer interface. It promises the Holy Grail. (Heim, 1993, p. 123).

This holy grail, as Heim suggest, is to create an artificial reality, "that would in turn transform ordinary reality" (p.124), a dream which he traces back to an ambitious theatrical production which stages the quest for the holy grail as a kind of liturgical and transformative experience for audiences; where the scripted redemption of a holy fool is doubled and expanded in an attempt to transform society. The production that Heim singles out is Richard Wagner's music-drama *Parsifal*, first staged at the Bayreuth *Festspielhaus* in 1882 (fig.3). Heim is, in fact, one of many to locate the Wagnerian *gesamtkunstwerk* as a pivotal point in the aesthetic genealogy of virtual reality.





Fig.3 – Richard Wagner, *Parsifal*. Stage set with the Temple of the Holy Grail from the premiere in Bayreuth, Germany, 1882.

In identifying Wagner's *Parsifal* as an essential forebear of VR, Heim points toward the way the work attempted to immerse audiences in a complex, mystical world, overwhelming the audience within an epic experience of sound, language, light and even smell. *Parsifal* was the closest Wagner would come to achieving his dream of the *gesamtkunstwerk*, or total work of art, a project he had been working toward since some thirty years earlier, when he published "The Artwork of the Future" (Wagner, 1895 [1849]). This essay, written from Zurich in exile after his involvement in the failed Dresden Uprising, set out a vision for an artwork which would might achieve a utopian, and political goal: to address what he saw as a fragmenting and alienated society, who had lost connection to the land, and to a mythic, organic 'folk-spirit' – or as Jaron Lanier might put it, a "shared mystical altered sense of reality" (in Heilbrun & Stacks, 1989, p. 115).

Wagner's goal was to create a form that would synthesise the various artistic forms of the time, bringing music, dance, drama, poetry and the visual arts together united into a single multi-sensory experience, which would act *viscerally* upon the bodies of the audience. Media theorist Friedrich Kittler, makes this point when he suggests that the 1865 premiere of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* in Munich, "was the beginning of the modern mass media" (Kittler, 2014, p. 133) precisely because it "began to play upon, and with, the nerves of the audience", in the "revolutionary darkness of the Festspielhaus" (p. 122). The Bayreuth Festspielhaus was one of the most technologically complex and innovative theatres of its time, and prototyped the design we recognise today in the contemporary theatre and cinema. The layout of the Festspielhaus eradicated galleries and private boxes in favour of plain rows of seating, with every seat offering an uninterrupted view of the stage. It was also the first theatre to cloak the audience in darkness, dimming of lights during performances. Audiences were stripped of their social entanglements and accompanying inhibitions, providing more suitable conditions for audiences to be *immersed* into Wagner's these mythic operas (fig.4).



Fig.4 – Bayreuth Theatre interior view, audience viewpoint, 1871. Available at: <https://www.br-klassik.de/themen/bayreuther-festspiele/geschichte/geschichte-der-bayreuther-festspiele-100.html>

Equally important, were the many techniques and tricks that Wagner developed (with the help of his designer, Carl Brandt) to create and maintain these mythical worlds. The most well known of these is the sunken orchestra pit, which hid the musicians from sight, allowing the music to emerge as if by magic, from what Wagner termed the ‘mystic gulf’ between the audience and the stage. Also hidden within the theatre were a number of complex machines which produced a variety effects. In *Parsifal*, the work culminates with one such trick, when the Holy Grail becomes illuminated with a thin shaft of light, that gradually grows and engulfs the stage, a canny and very early adoption of electric light in the theatre.

Viewing the *gesamtkunstwerk* as perhaps the first mass media helps to recognise it not simply as a cultural forebear to the later visions for VR, but in fact an early prototype for virtual reality: a machine which aimed to immerse its audience into an artificial world, while the means of production disappeared from sight. While Wagner serves as my primary example, as Oliver Grau (2003) and Alison Griffiths (2007) both trace the aesthetic dream of immersion through alternate genealogies; through frescos and panoramic landscape painting, and in the many iterations and applications of photographic media.

Wagner is far from the only theatre maker in history to embrace and explore the potentials of new technology; and the first waves of VR technology in the 1980s and 1990s were taken up with vigour. Unlike Wagner, however, there has been a notable trend in virtual and cyber-theatrical experimentation over the last three decades on emphasising, rather than hiding the technologies of production and reproduction. From Laurie Anderson’s avant-pop performance art, to Blast Theory’s experiments in mixed reality, and even Complicité’s 2015 production *The Encounter*, we might trace a tendency to make visible and understandable increasingly ubiquitous technologies. Since the turn of the millennium, however, there has been a steadily growing genre of performance

practices that have come to be understood as *immersive* theatre, which returns us to the aesthetic promise of immersive experience.

## Immersive Theatre: practitioners and definitions

Adam Alston suggests immersive theatre is “broadly premised on the production of experience” (2013, p.131), more specifically, particular types of experience. Yet the task of defining what constitutes an immersive experience has been a point of contention in recent theatre and performance scholarship. Oliver Grau argues that immersion can be “characterised by diminishing critical distance to what is shown and increasing emotional involvement in what is happening” (2003: 13), echoing the kind of affective state Wagner aspired to induce in his audience. White points an idea of deep engagement *within* a work, “of being inside and surrounded by a work” (223) but also notes the various ways this might be achieved, both physically and conceptually. Marie-Louise Ryan (2001) points to the capacity for literary texts to immerse readers within narratives, while Klich and Scheer define another model of immersion based on “sensorial overload” (2012, p.9). Rose Biggin, in *Immersive Theatre and Audience Experience* (2017) argues for an expansive definition of immersive theatre, to include the emotional and physical sensations of immersion, produced through a range of forms and content, and their interplay. My interest in this paper is not, however, to explore the spectrum of immersive theatre, but to focus on a immersive theatre genre, as its success, I argue, suggest a possible future developments in VR.

A useful, if brief description of the immersive theatre I am interested in is that offered by Sophie Nield, “in which the audience inhabit the space of the play alongside the actors” (2008 p.531). Nield is describing the work of companies such as Shunt, Goat and Monkey, and Punchdrunk. These companies, as Nield suggests, position audiences within the spaces of performance, including warehouses, hotels and office complexes. Gareth White offers a similar description, of “extensive environments which audiences explore in order to find the performance, and sometimes to give performances themselves” (2012 p.221). My primary example of this theatre will be the work of UK company Punchdrunk, founded in 2000 by artistic director Felix Barrett, and perhaps most known for their long-running immersive spectacular, *Sleep No More*. First shown in London, 2003, I will focus on the third iteration, developed with Emersive productions in New York City, which opened in 2011, and to date, continues to run.

*Sleep No More* is a film-noir inspired adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, which takes place in a large warehouse complex in Chelsea, transformed into the fictitious ‘McKittrick Hotel’ (from Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*). This lavishly designed, sprawling hotel, takes up 9,300 square metres over five floors. During the three hour performance, audiences are given free-reign to explore the hotel, which is populated with cast of around twenty-five actors playing out a number of narrative fragments. In many cases, these actors may also pull audience members into private, one-on-one encounters, which are often physically intimate. Audience members can follow characters, explore the many rooms of the hotel, and rummage through countless drawers and cupboards which are populated with a myriad of objects; documents, clothes, and even sweets.



Reviewer Scott Brown writes of the experience:

"I've felt theater overwhelm me before, but until last Tuesday, I've never felt it pass through me. At the end of my story, a witch-queen in a red dress found me rifling through her study, held out her hand, and whisked me down to the ballroom..."  
(2011 n.p)

The *Vice* blogger Annette Lamosthe-Ramos describes the experience of the work as "what it feels like to live inside a David Lynch film" (2011 n.p.). These feelings of being inside, overwhelmed and even *passed through* by the performance emphasise the primacy of *physical sensation*: a work that you not only see and hear, but taste, touch and smell. As Gareth White points out, works like *Sleep No More* "are immersive in an almost literal way" (2011 p.225), demanding the bodies of audiences be present *inside* the space. It is this visceral experience of sensation that leads Josephine Machon to suggest that rather than the mind, the *body* is the primary site of reception for these works, and proposes the concept of (syn)aesthetics to point toward the simultaneous, rather than sequential acts perceiving sense and making sense that these works induce (2009, p.14). Which brings me to the reason I argue such works are useful in thinking about the future of VR: immersive productions like *Sleep No More* offer us a taste, as it were, from Holy Grail: an experience of physical immersion in a world set apart from our everyday life.

## Immersive Theatre, VR, and Experience Economies



Fig.5 – *Sleep No More*, presented by Punchdrunk, Emursive and Rebecca Gold productions. The McKittrick Hotel, New York 2011. <https://www.punchdrunk.org.uk/sleep-no-more/>

While VR equipment is forced to simulate, through a range of sensory inputs and outputs, the feeling of bodily presence in a virtual world, immersive theatre is able to achieve this feeling quite easily. However, as Biggin observes, drawing on Ericka Fischer-

Lichte's (2012) distinction between 'weak' and 'strong' immersion, "immersive experience is not the automatic result of presence" (2017, p.23), pointing toward the many other techniques and qualities of Punchdrunk performances that allow for a stronger and intense experience of immersion. The first of these points toward the influence of digital culture on immersive theatre, which is the anonymity of audiences in Punchdrunk shows.

Audiences for *Sleep No More* are required to stay silent throughout the performance, and given identical white masks, which they must keep on for the duration of the performance (fig.5). This provides an easy means of distinction between audience and actors, directs the focus of audiences to the work rather than each other, and decreases inhibitions. As White argues, there is a paradox at work here, as the "mask maintains distance, while allowing proximity" (2009, p.228), pointing toward a larger cultural acceptance, if not appetite for experiences of voyeuristic intimacy and proximity. In this respect, it is hard not to recognise the influence of digital culture, of digital avatars and personas, at once both intimate and distant – and to recognise how such avatars and masks allow a separation from the everyday self that can increase immersion in a virtual space.

It is, however, the influence that immersive theatres might have on VR developments that I wish to focus on, particularly as experiential *economies*. In this respect I am drawing on the term advanced by B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore in their 1998 paper, "Welcome to the Experience Economy" (and subsequent book), which outlines a "transition from selling services to selling experiences" (1998, p. 98). As Pine and Gilbert argue, the staging of experience is distinct from commodity extraction, the production of goods, and even service delivery; experiences are *durational*, *memorable*, and *staged*. As Pine and Gilbert observe, experiences have often been designed and used to sell commodities; which is true of the current market for VR, focussed on selling headsets and other hardware. As the profitability of hardware diminishes, we might see a movement toward the increasing commodification of VR experiences. This is not just the potential to charge subscription fees to access to online services and worlds, or a shift toward admission fees to certain virtual experiences, but, as Pine and Gilbert point out, increasing levels of *participation*, where "customers play key roles in creating the performance or event that yields the experience" (1998, p. 101). Immersive theatre suggests a number of ways that experience can be commodified, and in the final section of this paper, I wish to focus on just two.

The first is to consider how immersive theatres make use of exclusivity. Within the worlds of free-roaming performances like *Sleep No More*, there are layers and complexities of experience, which are dependent on both the activity of participants in seeking them out, and their availability. As Adam Alston points out, "some will leave with a more complete or rewarding experience; and some will just be luckier than others in discovering a performance's hidden depths" (2016, p. 130). These performances hold out certain experiences which are rare; that by might only be experienced by just a few; and such scarcity makes them valuable. An example of this is the rumoured sixth floor of the McKittrick hotel in *Sleep No More*, which some participants have claimed to have visited

(Bonk, 2012). Another is the selection of audience members by actors for 'one-on-ones' within the hotel, which often involve participants being taken into otherwise locked or inaccessible spaces to receive exclusive experiences, which, as Alston notes, are "a potential source of pride for the haves and envy for the have-nots" (2016, p. 135).

This means that while exclusive experiences within *Sleep No More* are theoretically possible for all audience members; those with certain skills and insights into the world can tilt the odds in their favour. Evidence of this abounds on the online blogs and chat sites set up by dedicated fans of the show, who would attend repeatedly and became versed in particular strategies most likely to secure the more unique experiences within the performance. In many respects, scarcity is antithetical to digital possibility of the virtual world, where anything can be cut, copied and pasted.

In spite of this, we can observe the increasing development of digital economies built around scarcity. While crypto-currencies are one example, there are many expansive markets developed around gathering experience and virtual objects in online worlds, such as *World of Warcraft* (Barboza, 2005; Nakamura, 2009). The question of scarcity in virtual worlds has also been one explored in recent science fiction, from the economies operating in the virtual world of the 'OASIS' in Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* (whose protagonist just happens adopt the name Parzival for their avatar), to the practice of online 'gold-farming', and the highly secretive geological modelling used to distribute minerals in the massive multiplayer world depicted in Neal Stephenson's *REAMDE*. I suggest that the future commodification of VR experiences may turn toward the development of exclusive, or unevenly distributed experiences, turning away from digital repeatability toward one off and ephemeral experiences, to create new distribution patterns within experiential environments.

The exclusivity of certain experiences points toward the second aspect I wish to highlight, which is the importance of performative labour in immersive theatre. As Ericka Fischer-Lichte suggests, a 'strong' feeling of presence in performance is dependent upon "the actor's ability to occupy and command space and to attract the spectators' undivided attention" (2012, p.108). This kind of intense performance skill a certain type of skilled labour – which becomes most apparent in the one-to-one performances in *Sleep No More* described above. These performances command attention in a number of ways, but most reportedly through a sexually charged proximity. The performers might reach out and touch audience members; and even remove their masks during one-on-one performances.

While these interludes are in a sense scripted, performing in such proximate conditions requires a particular set of skills, and the physical and emotional exposure of performers. It should also be acknowledged, however, that this kind of intimate performance labour has its risks. Reports have emerged of a number of incidents of sexual assault of performers in *Sleep No More*. One such incident occurred to actor Billy Bell, who spoke to BuzzFeed news, saying audiences are "in this atmosphere that we've created where there are no limits, there are no rules, we're in a magical land right now — but in reality you're still a person" (in Jamieson, 2018). The human capacity here, to be intuitively responsive to participants, and tailor their performance, suggests another

direction that VR experiences might develop, as well as the possible risks. On the one hand, we might observe the expansion of the service industry into VR spaces, where communicative intuition can produce a richer experience. On the other, we might see the continued development of physical sensors and sophisticated machine intelligence, able to read and respond to bodies in ways that humans cannot, or even the fusion of physical reality and technology such as that depicted in HBO's *Westworld*, of a theme park filled with lifelike robots.

To return to the example of Zero Latency, we might observe both scarcity and performative labour at play in the commodification of this VR experience. Scarcity is produced by the limited number of players able to operate within the system. The system is only capable of accommodating 6 players at a time, and is priced at \$88 (AUD) per person, per 45 in-game minutes. The experience is also supervised by attendants, watching carefully and able to step in and explain or troubleshoot any issues should they arise.

## Conclusion: Taking some Virtual Perspective

The aesthetic genealogy traced in this essay, which locates virtual reality technology as (another) attempt to produce the ultimate media, or the 'total work of art' is one that has been acknowledged by a number of scholars and artists, but it is one that demands revisiting, particularly as the marketing of contemporary VR technologies is careful to avoid repeating the claims of the last century, of a transformative and utopian technology. In much the same way, the contemporary rise of immersive theatre has largely avoided claims of its transformative potential, marketing itself as escapist, rather than transcendent or revolutionary. However, as I have shown, both engage with the aesthetics of immersion, and focus on the hiding their means of production, and in this respect, demand some critical interrogation. The lack of a clear ideological or aesthetic agenda, in fact, only increases the importance of understanding why immersion has been revived this time around.

If there is an ideology perceivable behind this return to immersion, it is an economic one; an imperative to produce novel experiences that might be consumed. The desire for the means of production to recede seem primarily directed toward making the consumption of experience as streamlined as possible. As Matthew Smith points out, "there is nothing about cyberspace...that necessitates a break with bourgeois aesthetics" (2007, p. 186).

While the recent developments in VR have been promising, they are yet to achieve the goal of full immersion – and I have argued that the capacity of immersive theatre productions to achieve this 'Holy Grail' of full immersion shows us that this goal is not, in fact, the be-all and-end all of VR development. Drawing on the current literature on immersive theatre, with a particular focus on the works of Punchdrunk, I have argued that there is more to the experience economy of these works than simply being present and able to roam freely about a custom built environment. Rather, through the distribution of certain experiences, and the performative labour required to create them, immersive theatre suggests a number of futures that VR companies may pursue, and in some respects, are already adopting. I have suggested that this represents one future

direction of VR, which stands in contrast with many of the qualities of digital media that have allowed the unprecedented processes of media convergence in the last two decades. While it remains to be seen just how VR will develop, I believe the questions raised in the theatre offer us a useful perspective from which to observe these developments, as well as a lexicon to critique the forms of experience they create.

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### AUTHOR BIO:

**Asher Warren** is a Lecturer in Theatre at the University of Tasmania. His research interests include intermedial and networked participatory performances. He is a member of the PSi Future Advisory Board, and has published in *Performance Research*, *Australasian Drama Studies* and in the edited collection *Performance in a Militarized Culture* (2017).

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Refractory: A Journal of Entertainment Media

Published by Screen and Cinema Studies, Department of Media and Communication,  
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