
VR Unleashes New Dimensions of Horror

By Merinda Staubli

During the 1980s and '90s, the concept of VR hit “the mass brainstem like a rush of crack, the term rapidly took on the millennialist charge of all pop futurisms”^[1].

Science-fiction films such as *Brainstorm* (1983) and *The Lawnmower Man* (1992) through to manga and anime series *Sword Art Online* (2009), depicted visions of the future potential of VR in which people used technology to upload themselves into virtual worlds. For many, the dream of the ultimate VR experience was “a transcendence of the limits of physical reality”^[2] - a transportation into new universes beyond the laws of our own. More than thirty years later, studios, filmmakers and animators are now working in increasing numbers to understand and unleash the potential of the first wave of home VR systems. VR represents an unprecedented paradigm shift in most aspects of the media production process as well as the technical platforms for its consumption; with boundless possibilities.

While speculation is rife about its potential for different media and genres, it would appear based on the history of major innovations in screen media that a new, intensified dimension of horror is assured. I argue that the key transformative characteristics of VR - its unprecedented immersion and first-person interactivity - are best suited to horror ahead of all other genres. Horror is a body genre, to cite Carol Clover's term, built on immersion, physicality and the suspension of disbelief. Linda Williams argues that horror, melodrama and pornography are all body genres in which “the spectator is caught up in an almost involuntary mimicry of the emotion or sensation of the body”^[3]. Horror's trademark is its ability to give the body “an actual physical jolt”^[4]; for the viewer to vicariously become paranoid of their own safety, to feel goosebumps in response to their dread and suspense, and to literally jump out of their seat. VR amplifies these reactions - these innate pleasures of horror - by its corporeality: the participant's own body reciprocally interacting with the VR universe and all its grisly manifestations. VR instantly achieves what some of the great innovators in filmmaking have strived for, often in ingenious and surprising ways, since the dawn of cinema: to transport the viewer beyond the physical boundary of the two-dimensional screen to another place, for an embodied, sensory and participatory experience. These three facets of audience experience are the ingredients needed to create what I describe as “experiential media”: an experience that immerses the senses and

allows direct participation; not a passive screening but an event in which the audience is a part of the diegesis. VR surpasses all previous screen-based experiential media with full-immersion, first-person interactivity; we've never experienced it before, except in real life.

Perhaps ironically but precisely because it is new and transformative, VR has revived and reinvented the "cinema of attractions" – the term coined by Tom Gunning to distinguish the very earliest cinema from the narrative-based films that predominated from 1906. Gunning describes the cinema of attractions as, "less as a way of telling stories than as a way of presenting a series of views to an audience, fascinating because of their illusory power (whether the realistic illusion of motion offered to the first audiences by Lumière, or the magical illusion concocted by Méliès), and exoticism"^[61]. Gunning emphasises what he calls an emblematic aspect of early cinema: "the recurring look at the camera by actors. This action, which is later perceived as spoiling the realistic illusion of the cinema, is here undertaken with brio, establishing contact with the audience"^[61]. From "comedians smirking at the camera, to the constant bowing and gesturing of the conjurers in magic films" it was this direct address of the audience "in which an attraction is offered to the spectator by a cinema showman, that defines this approach to filmmaking...emphasizing the direct stimulation of shock or surprise at the expense of unfolding a story or creating a diegetic universe"^[71].

Throughout the history of entertainment, experiential horror has repeatedly employed new technical innovations in attempts to reignite audience fervour for the horror genre as a participatory spectacle. Filmmakers can now do far more than acknowledge their audience, they can invite them inside the diegesis. Stepping into the world of an experiential text is like entering an amusement park: participants are immersed in the magic and wonder of the media. This experience is epitomised in VR. VR users today, like the audiences of early cinema, are seeing places and spectacles for the first time and in ways that are unfamiliar to them. Whereas an actor's look at the camera in early cinema may have been to invite applause or surprise, in VR such a direct look could be to question your next move as the main protagonist in a virtual world; the participant is directly interacted with as a character within the diegesis. We are now able to step into a limitless number of artificial universes and come face to face with all our favourite characters as well as yet unimagined villains and monsters. This has the potential to revolutionise the horror genre because in VR the monsters no longer only chase the characters on screen; now they're coming after you. When watching a traditional horror film, you may feel the hairs bristling on the back of their neck or become paranoid about something lurking behind the couch. In VR, there may actually be something there. Characters and creatures are now able to invade your personal space. To stalk you, sneak

up behind you and even attack you. You are no longer a voyeur hidden safely behind the screen; now, you are being watched.

This article explores some of the major innovations in experiential horror, the nature of their experiences, why they were successful; and their immediate relevance to understanding the potential of VR as the latest and perhaps greatest innovation in experiential media of any genre.

In postulating on VR's potential impact on the horror genre, this article looks at a wide range of media, including interactive horror theatre, 3D, viral marketing, alternate reality games, film and television series, to contextualise VR within wider horror media and experiences and to postulate about the proven horror techniques that are likely to be reinvented or find new victims in VR universes.

Contemporary Virtual Reality (VR) systems use stereoscopic lenses to produce a screen-based, three-dimensional, artificial environment in which the user's movements are tracked and his or her surroundings change in reaction to those movements. For example, when the wearer of a VR headset turns their head, the field of their vision turns in the same direction in the artificial environment in real time. This gives the viewer the sense of being present in a virtual world. The environment can be filmic, animated and/or computer-generated imagery (CGI). Some VR content is 180 degrees – the 3D environment extends in front of the viewer from his or her direct left and direct right, and vertically. Turning your head past your direct right or left or beyond vertical (that is, behind you) reveals blackness. Most VR content, however, is being produced in 360 degrees because this view enhances immersion by giving the impression of being located wholly, even bodily, inside the environment as opposed to being outside looking in. Due to the depth or dimensions of the environment being determined by the content (the video playing), the environment can appear to be infinitely small (a tiny space) or infinitely vast (outer space).

Some headsets have integral screen(s) and are attached to either a game console or a personal computer, whereas others are designed to be used with a compatible mobile phone which must be inserted into the headset, pre-loaded with a VR application and VR content. Some headsets provide sound and connectivity for related devices such as hand-held controllers and motion and location detection devices. A design priority of headsets should be to block out the real world which is a critical step towards achieving a sense of immersion or embodiment in a virtual world. Frank Biocca and Mark R. Levy have described the importance of sensory immersion in reality substitution: "The blocking of sensory impressions from physical reality is a crucial part of the most compelling VR experiences. The senses are immersed in the virtual world; the body is

entrusted to a reality engine”^[9]. Popular headsets include the *Google Cardboard* and *Samsung Gear VR*. Console and PC-based systems include *Oculus Rift*, *HTC Vive* and *Playstation VR*. The different systems and content support varying means and levels of interactivity. In some experiences, participants can look around the environment while the scene plays but they cannot interact with the scene. In others, participants can navigate the environment using either a controller or by moving their body: lean forward to look outside windows or over the edge of a precipice; or bend down to look underneath objects, such as to see what is lurking under the bed, as in the VR game *Boogeyman*. Emerging technologies that stimulate the body to achieve a greater sense of presence and immersion in the virtual world include omnidirectional treadmills, data gloves and full-motion VR harnesses or rigs that can induce the sensation of flying (such as *Icaros* and *Birdly*).

The convergence of VR with other new technologies has the potential to further renew and transform VR and the horror genre in unprecedented and intimate ways. Before VR, horror media sought to engage audiences in a frightening tale concerning imaginary characters. Soon, through the use of personal online data, horror will be able to transport individual audience members into their own personal nightmares. Just as our personal browsing data is collected for targeted advertising, our data could be used to customise our virtual worlds. AI researcher Michael Cook has already described game-worlds populated with “people you know, the things they like doing, the places they visit and the relationships people have with one another”^[9]. A personalised horror universe – especially one in which you are trying to survive with representations of your real friends or family members – could have frightening consequences, as I will explore later in this article. An increasing gamification of horror media in VR also seems inevitable. Participants already have the ability to influence the story themselves, and could be given options as to where it leads like in a choose-your-own-adventure book. These developments will likely blur the distinctions in VR between what is cinema and gaming. Horror media and games are also likely to become more cinematic as a result of being produced for a spherical 360-degree universe.

Alex Barder, co-founder of *VRWERX*, the studio that created *Paranormal Activity The Lost Souls* VR game, has argued that “what VR horror has done has raised the bar on horror storytelling...if you’re still making a regular movie on a movie screen, you really have to work that much harder to compete with VR horror”^[10]. Recent films have demonstrated the power of traditional horror cinema as allegory and cultural expression, such as the cannibal film *Raw* (2017), a feminist coming-of-age story, and the record-breaking *Get Out* (2017), a commentary on white violence and racism towards African-Americans. Since the turn of the century,

however, the genre has been flooded with remakes and sequels, many of which were widely considered to have added nothing new to the genre and were seen as “a pointless exercise in style”^[11] (Hantke – p.x), not matching the dread or suspense of the originals. In 2017 alone, remakes and sequels include: *Resident Evil: The Final Chapter*, *Rings*, *Alien: Covenant*, *Amityville: Awakening*, *Underworld: Blood Wars*, *Annabelle 2*, *It*, *Flatliners*, *Chucky 7*, *Insidious: Chapter 4*, *Saw: Legacy*, *Dark Universe: The Mummy*, *World War Z 2*, *Wrong Turn 7*, *Suspiria*, *Hellraiser: Judgement*, *Jeepers Creepers 3: Cathedral*, *Children of the Corn: Runaway* and *Halloween*. It is likely that filmmakers and studios will embrace the opportunity to recreate past successes for VR because of their pre-existing audience and hence relative financial security. It may well be that these sequels and remakes, reimagined and recreated as they would have to be for a VR universe, will win new fans based on the spectacle of VR and also give existing fans the opportunity to experience (or play an active role for the first time) in their favourite horror franchises, more intensely and intimately than ever before.

I argue that VR will not replace traditional horror cinema but will act as a revolutionary alternative. Viewers sometimes desire a more passive viewing experience even in the horror genre which can be chilling, psychological and atmospheric instead of a lurching rollercoaster. VRWERX's other co-founder Russell Naftal explained: “We were right on track when my daughter tried out some of the game...She stopped – and she loves horror movies – and she said ‘I love them. I don't want to be in them’”^[12]. This raises the point that VR horror may be too intense to be enjoyed all the time and when experiences are too extreme, it may result in alienating some audiences. It also introduces the question: Could VR horror be too shocking for entertainment? Audiences and critics, however, have posed the same question throughout the history of horror and it continues to be divisive. Finally, there is more to the horror genre than simply startling its audience; it is one of the oldest and consistently popular genres and its longevity could not have been built on jump scares alone. Horror can explore the human condition, act as historical or cultural allegory, reflect societal fears, and be as masterful as any other genre. I posit that traditional horror cinema is an art-form which will continue to be prolific for the foreseeable future. It may be that some horror stories are still best told in the cinema, just as other genres are likely to find a use for VR to tell particular stories best experienced bodily.

A Glimpse Into the History of Experiential Horror

Horror experiences that include the audience as part of the diegesis predate cinema. For centuries, storytellers, inventors, magicians and showmen have experimented with experiential horror techniques to blur

the line between reality and imagination. While the history of experiential horror is not a linear timeline, it is useful to look at some of its key innovations in order to understand what current VR technology is both drawing and building upon. I have selected as examples of experiential horror:

- **the phantasmagoria** - perhaps the earliest immersive, technological horror experience and like VR, encapsulated its audience in an interactive horror universe
- **3D** - to acknowledge the constraints in innovations in experiential horror when confined to the two-dimensional screen; and
- **viral marketing** - to illustrate the impact horror monsters have had on participants and the genre after crossing the threshold into the “real world”.

Phantasmagoria

Grimod de la Reynière, a famous gastronome, could have been describing contemporary VR when he reported his visit to the phantasmagoria:

“The illusion is certainly complete. The total darkness of the location of the scene, the choice of the figures, the astonishing magic of their truly terrifying graduation...all come together to strike your imagination and to take all your observational senses. Reason may tell you that they are just phantoms, artfully devised, skilfully performed and cleverly presented catoptical tricks, but your shattered brain only believes what it is made to see, and we believe we have been transported into another world and other ages”^[13].

Beginning in the late 18th century, the phantasmagoria was possibly the first technologically immersive horror experience: a form of theatre which used magic lanterns to project spectral images. To hide the screen and to create the illusion that ghosts were materialising in the air, the images were often projected onto “a curtain of smoke” or transparent screen, bounced off an “inclined mirror”^[14]. The projected image could appear to travel across the screen, “burst from the rear of the canvas” and move towards the audience “at astonishing speed” before abruptly disappearing^[15]. The images were also often accompanied by sound effects. A showman named Robertson included the gimmick of having assistants who walked amongst the audience “in the dark wearing paper-mache masks lit from the inside”^[16]. This reportedly managed to startle at least one spectator who hit one of the assistants with a walking stick, expecting to “strike empty air”^[17]. Phantasmagoria shows were often used to conjure images of the dead. Generally, these were famous people, but also anyone recently deceased if the showman could be provided with a portrait at least a few days prior to the event. They were also able to

create doppelgängers of the living; as one journalist reported: “I saw myself walking up and down and trembling before me!”^[18].

Many other immersive horror experiences followed, including the Grand-Guignol; a Parisian horror theatre renowned for its violence, gore and terror. The theatre was claustrophobic; the audience sitting near the stage and its actors known to make eye contact with the audience to create a feeling of complicity in the violent acts. Then there were 1950s showmen such as William Castle, who literally let his films loose into the cinema with flying skeletons, vibrating seats and a monster that could only be pacified by screaming. From campfire-lit ghost stories to haunted houses, there are vast examples of experiential horror throughout the history of entertainment in which audiences have been included as part of the diegesis.

3D

In contrast with the countless forgotten gimmickry of 1950s horror cinema, one innovation that continues to be reinvented and find renewed popularity is 3D. 3D films are shot with two lenses positioned slightly apart (roughly the distance between the human eyes), and the two recordings are projected to the screen through polarised filters of different orientations (angles of polarisation). The 3D effect is created by the polarised glasses worn by the audience: each lens only permits light of the same orientation to pass through it, so that the audience sees one polarized image in each eye. The human brain interprets the slight difference between the two images as being caused by distance from the subject and effectively knits the two images together as one to create the illusion of depth. Films such as *House of Wax* (1953) and *Creature From the Black Lagoon* (1954), have become iconic, however, their pioneering use of 3D effects is largely forgotten. Since the 1980s, 3D has most often been used in horror to renew interest in a film franchise, with sequels that are generally inferior to the originals, such as *Jaws 3D* (1983), *Amityville 3D* (1983), *Final Destination 5* (2011) and *Paranormal Activity: The Ghost Dimension* (2015). When asked about the horror-comedy film *Piranha 3D* (2010), James Cameron said:

“I tend almost never to throw other films under the bus, that is exactly an example of what we should not be doing in 3-D. Because it just cheapens the medium and reminds you of the bad 3-D horror films from the 70s and 80s...When movies got to the bottom of their barrel of their creativity and the last few gasps of their financial lifespan, they did a 3-D version to get the last few drops of blood out of the turnip.”^[19]

3D has had great success in blockbuster films, especially in sci-fi and fantasy genres where it is used to showcase the detail of the CGI universe. While 3D horror is an enduring spectacle, it fails to achieve immersion. Rather than break down the 4th wall, I would argue that its

flying weapons and body parts merely warp the screen before bouncing back into their own universe. Instead of drawing the viewer into the film world, these effects float into a “liminal space in front of the screen” which “creates a chasm between the film’s world and the spectators”^[20]. 3D horror films are polarising, some viewers are excited by the experience while others claim that the effects irritate their vision. There are also some stereoblind viewers who are unable to perceive 3D but are able to experience VR. For viewers that embrace 3D, the experience can engage the body as well as create new thrilling forms of spectacle in kill scenes as weapons hurtle towards the viewer or pierce through the onscreen character to create an optical explosion of blood and gore. These experiences, however, seem to be best enjoyed infrequently and while spectacular, tend to produce a self-reflexive, comedic effect – bringing to attention the film’s artifice. 3D horror so far has not been used to immerse audiences in horror’s universes. This is possibly due to the constraints of budget, comparative lack of CGI and/or horror’s tendency to be set in relatable real world locations. VR, however, aims to conceal all signs of mediation to plunge the participant into the scene. Participants are able to explore and become immersed in the experience’s setting, rather than mainly focusing on the special effects. 3D horror offers a unique aesthetic and participatory experience, however, it seems likely that its fans are ready to move onto the next level visual and sensory assault potentials of VR.

Viral Marketing

The monsters and mythology of horror have found ways to creep into our reality – long before we have been remotely transported into theirs. One of the most historic examples of horror permeating our reality were the orchestrated events leading up to the release of *The Blair Witch Project* (1999). The found footage film was marketed like a documentary. At the film’s premiere at *Sundance Film Festival*, fliers featured photos of the film’s three stars underneath the headline ‘MISSING’, with information about their alleged disappearance^[21]. In the lead-up to the film’s release, a special named *Curse of the Blair Witch* (1999), was aired on cable television, which included “interviews with law enforcement officials, inhabitants of the film’s setting and ‘newsreel’ footage of a character alluded to in the film, a child-murderer named Rustin Parr”^[22]. The film’s website further perpetuated the film’s mythology and included constructed “police reports, interviews with the ‘missing’ filmmakers’ parents” and “a timeline on the mythology of the Blair Witch extending back to the eighteenth century”^[23]. Spread mainly by discussion in online chatrooms, the website became not only “the most-accessed film website of the year, but according to Nielsen NetRatings was among the top fifty

most used sites on the entire Internet during the week preceding the film's national release"^[24]. The film earned almost \$250 million in the box office worldwide – almost 10,000 times its production budget, making it the most profitable horror film of all time^[25]. It was only overtaken by *Paranormal Activity* (2007), another found footage film that utilised online marketing to promote its immersion by recording frightened audience responses. The latest instalment in the franchise was produced in 3D and the franchise is now reportedly moving into VR.

Following *The Blair Witch Project* phenomenon, horror monsters now commonly sneak physically into our world for experiential, viral marketing. For *Devil's Due* (2014), *Thinkmodo* created a video featuring an animatronic devil baby in a remote controlled pram. *Thinkmodo's* devil baby has black eyes, protruding veins and green vomit dribbling down its chin. In the video, the pram appears to move on its own, sometimes sneaking up on people. The baby suddenly sits up and starts screeching, projectile vomiting and at one point raises a middle finger to a police car. The unwitting responses from the people in the street range from screaming in fright, delighted surprise to plain confusion. All of *Thinkmodo's* advertisements, which have included campaigns for *Rings* (2017), *Carrie* (2013) and television series *The Walking Dead*, have been “watched more than a million times – many of them more than 10 million”^[26].

The Blair Witch Project demonstrated the untapped potential of the Internet as a new platform through which monsters could arrive in our world. Today, horror viral marketing continues to find its victims in the real world and through different kinds of technology. The film *The Last Exorcism* (2010), frightened people on *Chatroulette*, a website that randomly links webcams – controversially known for men broadcasting their masturbation. For *The Last Exorcism* promotion, instead of a live webcam, a prerecorded video was used. The video features an attractive woman who begins to undo her top...she looks up, her eyes roll back and cracks appear across her face before she lurches towards the camera, roaring. The URL of the film's website then appears in her place. The video circulated *Chatroulette* “for up to 2 hours a day”^[27]. A recording of viewers responding to the clip – most often showing male arousal turning into shock, disbelief or disgust – went viral. On *YouTube*, the video has had over nine million views. With a budget of \$1.8 million, the film grossed over \$41 million in the US and \$67,738,090 globally^[28].

The tremendous success of experiential marketing demonstrates the demand for active participation in horror media to interact with its creatures and mythology. *The Blair Witch Project* appealed to audiences who wished to become enmeshed in the film's supernatural universe (some people believed that the footage was real) as well as participants

who sought to piece together the puzzles of evidence. It is unlikely that a film today could create widespread belief in a fictional world or monster due to audience familiarity and the proliferation of the Internet. VR, however, allows participants to interact with the text more intimately than ever before. A further evolution of experiential marketing seems possible with participants able to physically interact with the film's universe and its inhabitants; however, it is too soon to gauge how marketing content creators will respond to the opportunity and challenges of this new platform, and if direct marketing into these worlds will match or exceed previous outcomes.

Contemporary VR Horror Experiences

There is now more demand for immersive, interactive experiences than ever before. This is evidenced by the rapidly increasing popularity of escape rooms, for example – a form of immersive, participatory entertainment in which typically a group of people are locked in a room and have to solve puzzles within a time limit to successfully “escape”. The experiences are escapist because they contain an interactive narrative and tend to be set in fictional locations. According to Nate Martin, co-founder of *Puzzle Break*, escape rooms jumped from five installations in 2013 to 1500 in 2017^[29]. Escape rooms and the marketing of *The Blair Witch Project* could be considered parallel experiences in that participants are not primarily interested in watching a narrative unfold: it is about participation; being a part of and exploring the diegesis. There is no story without the interaction of the participants; they are characters and the narrative is influenced by their actions.

Immersive theatre and haunted house simulations are older forms of entertainment that have also recently grown in popularity, intensity and sophistication. An example is Darren Lyn Bousman's immersive theatre production *The Tension Experience*, which offers an individualised horror experience. The plot and universe of *The Tension Experience* are so extensive that the theatre was promoted using an alternate reality game (ARG). This took the form of a transmedia story that takes place online and in the real world whereby participants can interact with and can alter the narrative through role-playing and puzzle solving. During the ARG, “participants solved riddles on the *Tension* website, met characters during sinister, in-person ‘consultations,’ and answered hundreds of incredibly invasive questions as part of the experience”^[30]. The ARG players came to know the story's actors and their characters and through online forums, the community of players expanded the storyline. Some of their unique experiences included one player meeting a character in real life and witnessing that character's throat being slit “just inches from her

face”^[321]. Another character was choked to death on camera in a forum^[322]. The website states that the theatre experience blurs “the lines between reality and fiction” before, and during the theatre event using “actors, emails, phone calls, live video streams, in person events and just about every other avenue to get inside your head”. Each participant was required to fill out a questionnaire to personalise their experience. The simulation took place in “a labyrinthine warehouse” and one participant reported that their unique experience involved being stripped; made to call his wife “and tell her lies”; “post a fake *Facebook* status update”; “pretend a desk was [his] father’s coffin and tell him what [he] really thought of him”; touch himself sexually for thirty seconds; eat “human flesh”; be blindfolded and hogtied and be “in a vertical coffin of static-filled TV screens pressed against the body of” another participant^[33]. The cast worked from a “400 page script” and responses and plot points were triggered by the participant’s actions – some of which never eventuated^[34].

Bousman has theorised that the appeal of these experiences stems from “concern over our cultural obsession with mobile devices and social media interaction”^[35]. He claims that there are a growing number of people who “want to step away from the ever present-threat of online connectivity” to develop “physical connections, tangible connections with people” and “either consciously or subconsciously...reconnect with something visceral again”^[36]. While it may seem ironic, considering VR’s nature of shutting out the “real” world to a greater extent than ever before, these are exactly the experiences VR has to offer with the objective of complete immersion. Erik Davis has explained that VR’s ultimate goal is “absolute simulation: a medium so powerful that it transcends mediation, building worlds that can stand on their own two feet”^[37]. VR removes the sense of disconnection induced by mediation by making the participant an active member of the virtual universe; creating a physical, visceral experience.

Currently, VR lacks improvisation of storyline and character responses, the involvement of senses such as touch and smell, and the communal experience in the home environment. There are a growing number of VR experiences, however, that fuse VR technology with a physical environment. For example, *Zero Latency* started as a free-roaming zombie shooter VR simulation in a North Melbourne warehouse. In the initial experience, participants wore a VR headset connected to “a custom-made backpack” holding a PC hooked up to “a pair of headphones with an integrated mic for voice communications”^[38]. They also wielded a 2.5kg gun that was reportedly integral to the immersive experience in the way that it physically connected players to the virtual world^[39]. Journalist Campbell Simpson has described that “the sense of presence” almost eliminates “the sense that you’re wearing a computer on your back and running around in a warehouse”, and the fact that “there’s the faintest

hint of the real world rushing back in when you take off the *Oculus Rift* after wearing it for almost an hour”^[40]. Today, *Zero Latency*’s reach and technology continue to steadily improve and it now has “free-roaming virtual reality spaces in Tokyo, Madrid and Orlando” as well as a planned new Melbourne location^[41]. It also offers new experiences, such as “a sci-fi corridor shooter”, a 12 minute experience to survive “against a horde of zombies”, and a “physics puzzle” in which players “explore a floating stone maze”^[42].

These experiences, like current immersive horror simulations, are more expensive than the average VR download and require the participants to be able to travel to a particular location at a selected time. With VR’s constantly updating technology, it seems likely that in the near future we will be able to enjoy similar communal experiences by traversing the physical spaces of our own homes and backyards: VR can “be networked so that more than one person can enter the world at the same time and interact with each other in the same environment”^[43] using microphones and tactile feedback devices, such as the guns in *Zero Latency*. Furthermore, unlike previous experiential horror, the participant is not limited to whatever experiences happen to be hosted in their local area. With VR’s online connectivity there is the potential of boundless universes for its users to download and enter.

The Risks of Teleporting Into Horrific Universes

“Virtual reality is not a technology; it is a destination”^[44].

A common concern about the rise of VR is that some people will choose to reside in virtual worlds over reality – a phenomenon that can already be seen in rare cases of people who neglect their health and/or their family for their video game addiction, occasionally resulting in death. For example, in 2015, two men were found dead on separate occasions in Internet Cafes in Taiwan^[45]. It was reported that when police and paramedics arrived at the scene of the second man’s death, who died of a cardiac arrest while gaming, other gamers in the cafe “continued as if nothing happened”^[46]. In 2010, there was a case in South Korea of a three-month-old baby who died from malnutrition due to being neglected by her parents who were addicted to the massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMO) *Prius*; a game that involved raising virtual children^[47]. Similar cases are less likely in VR horror because it is unlikely that participants would choose to spend their life enveloped in a virtual nightmare. Reports of serious video-game addictions commonly involve MMOs such as *Second Life* where players are able to create elaborate alternative lives for themselves with virtual homes, assets, achievements and online friends and partners. Horror games, however, tend to be a battle for survival with the game concluding once the gamer has

overcome the set objectives.

VR horror does, however, come with its own risks. When watching a traditional horror film, the experience is mitigated. Viewers are passive and their source of terror is typically through identification with the characters on screen. What then happens when the horror is inflicted directly upon its audience, when the onlooker becomes a character? These concerns can be encapsulated in the myth of the panicking audience. Beginning in 1896 with the Lumière brother's film *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat*, there arose the reported phenomenon of audiences flinching or running away from the projected image of an approaching train because the image was so realistic that they feared they were about to be run over. It is likely, however, that most of these stories were fabricated to promote the realism of the films as well as to dare audiences to see it for themselves. It is possible that with VR's depth of immersion, participants may genuinely feel at risk. In fact, while horror films are known to make the typical audience member jump, there are already countless videos online featuring people shrieking and quivering while trying out VR horror games and experiences for the first time.

For participants unprepared for a horror experience, there is always the potential for trauma. These concerns can be seen explored in a recent episode of *Black Mirror*^[48], a contemporary science-fiction anthology series similar to *The Twilight Zone*^[49] except that it is more firmly tethered to our reality. It is focused on the potential of new technologies in not-so-distant futures and often the storylines are frightening for seeming not-so-far-fetched; demonstrating our modern paranoia of the unknown repercussions of living in a tech-based society. News articles that followed the latest season's premiere appeared to confirm some of the show's predictions. For example, China's contemplation of a social credit score system^[50], that is similar to the plot of episode *Nosedive*, in which a social media ratings system determines one's privileges in society. Another recent news story highlighted Japan's invention of artificial bee drones^[51], reminiscent of the plot of the episode *Hated in the Nation*. While focused more on augmented reality than virtual reality, the episode *Playtest* is an analogy of current fears of technological horror experiences becoming too extreme.

In *Playtest*, American backpacker Cooper is a thrill-seeker. He boasts to Sonja, a girl he meets on a dating app, about how he ran with the bulls in Spain as he shows off a scar on his arm like a souvenir or mark of achievement. In short, he appears to be the perfect candidate for VR horror. He responds to a job advertisement to test new video game software at the company *SaitoGemu*, where he is invited to beta test "the most personal survivor horror game in history...that works out how to scare you by using your own mind...". Participants must have a small

device inserted into the back of their neck which provides a data connection between the participant's brain and the game platform. The game is closer to a haunted house experience than a video game but with augmented reality manifestations rather than actors and stagecraft. During the experience, the scares intensify. To begin, he is driven to a 19th-Century Gothic mansion. A large spider runs across the floor before suddenly jumping at him. He encounters a representation of Josh Peters, "the high-school dick", whose face is later composited onto a giant, grotesque spider. Later, Sonja arrives, first as his friend but then she begins to attack him with a knife, piercing his chest from behind, as the flesh on her face is digitally peeled away to reveal bone and muscle. He manages to impale her skull onto the knife protruding from his chest. At this point Cooper calls out to be released from the game, screaming insistently that he could physically feel being stabbed. He is told this is impossible because the game is purely audiovisual. The plot culminates with him losing touch with any sense of reality and he spirals physically and mentally into uncontrollable terror - ultimately losing his sanity as he fears the game has overridden his mind and memories.

Entertainment technology fusing with the body may not seem to be a concern for the immediate future; however, elements of *Playtest*'s horror game can be seen today. The use of psychological analysis of players to customise their experience, as seen in both *Playtest* and *The Tension Experience*, has been experimented with in survival horror video games, such as in *Silent Hill: Shattered Memories*. Under the guise of assessing the mental health of the game's protagonist, character Dr Kaufmann provides the player with "a questionnaire inspired by the 'Big 5' personality test"^[52]. The game also collects data on "how players interacted with the game world: how long they spent exploring each area before moving on; whether they strayed from clearly marked paths" et cetera^[53]. Using this data, the game adapts to play upon each player's own fears and behaviours. There has also been development work by AI researchers such as Noor Shaker, on creating video games that can monitor and adjust to players' emotions. Shaker said she believes "data-driven automatic content personalisation is possible" and that "recent research has shown that emotions such as frustration, engagement and surprise can be detected and modelled by machine learning methods"^[54]. Therefore, it is reasonable to postulate that in the future, there will be VR experiences that curate personalised nightmares based on each participant's phobias, emotions and behaviours.

As mentioned previously, our personal data could also be used to customise our VR experiences, complete with digital versions of our social media friends. A personalised horror universe could have frightening consequences. While horror cinema, games and other experiences allow us to explore our fears through a safe, controlled

performance far removed from our reality, VR could use our data to envelop us in a dreadful version of our daily reality. Imagine representations of your friends, family or pets in danger, pain or perhaps like *Playtest*, changed or morphed into some uncanny other. Even journeying as allies with representations of people we know seems a potentially disturbing concept. Deceased family members could re-appear, such as in phantasmagoria shows, potentially to the shock of the participant. With *Google Maps Street View* technology, there could be nightmarish recreations of your own neighbourhood. An example of an early version of a horror experience mining our data is the website, *Take This Lollipop*. After given permission to access your *Facebook* account, a video plays of a hillbilly-type character sitting at a computer in a dark room with creepy music. He looks through your *Facebook* profile - your "friends", photos and statuses - while sweating, staring intensely at the screen and at one point running his fingers across one of your photos before gazing sinisterly into the camera. He then searches for the suburb of your address before he is shown driving in a car with flashes of maniacal rage. The experience overall is generally very creepy, although it can also be unintentionally humorous depending on what photos are randomly chosen and because it relies on your *Facebook* information, tends to be accurate. It is yet to be seen how unsettling these personalised universes will prove to be.

Of course, not all horror experiences are terrifying, nor do they need to be to succeed. VR does not guarantee scares. As ever, it depends on the story and its execution. Horror history suggests VR will offer content from fairytale lands to "torture porn". Consumers will still be able to choose their own experiences. One would expect that some VR experiences will test the tolerance of even the most desensitised thrill-seekers, which could be the intent of some. Concern over the dangers of horror is perpetual but I would argue has proven to be largely unfounded or overblown. Jeffrey Goldstein supports the theory that safe and enjoyable horror begins with consent:

"Both the context of violent images themselves and the circumstances in which they are experienced play a crucial role in their appeal. People go to horror films in order to experience in safety emotions that are usually associated with danger. In order to experience anything like pleasure from exposure to violent or threatening images, the audience must feel relatively safe and secure in their surroundings".^[55]

In *Playtest*, Cooper meets with SaitoGemu creator, Shou Saito, who discusses the appeal of horror gaming: "I have always liked to make the player jump. Frightened, you get a scare, you jump. Afterwards, you feel good, you glow...mostly because you are still alive. You have faced your greatest fears in a safe environment. It is a release of fear. It liberates

you”.

Conclusion

VR is a revolutionary entertainment technology which promises particular potential for the horror genre ahead of most others because it can be used to enhance, reinvent and reimagine powerful experiential horror techniques within new universes. It is a new era of embodied, participatory experiences; accessible by portable, affordable home entertainment systems. VR horror has the potential for causing unpleasant or even traumatic experiences because of its heightened sensory impact. This is a risk present for all horror experiences, however, and participants knowingly push their own limits. It allows participants to step beyond the barrier of the two-dimensional screen to be part of the text’s universe and narrative as a character themselves - creating more immersive, personalised, participatory and physical at-home experiences than ever before. The thrill and adrenaline of horror can be an escapism from the normality, the mundanity of our everyday bodily experiences. Through horror we are able to explore our raw, base emotions. In safety, we confront and overcome threats to our bodies, sanity, values and/or morality. VR has the capacity to reinvent horror media to unprecedented immersiveness, interactivity and embodiment. By blurring the distinctions between horror cinema, games and simulations, VR allows participants the pleasure of heightened sensory and participatory experiences in new and exciting universes. Now, there really is something behind you.

Notes

1. Due to this research being focused on the horror genre and the limitations of this article, other VR predecessors have not been mentioned, including but not limited to: Dioramas, Panoramas, Stereoscopes, virtual travel experiences showcased at World Expos (e.g. *Hale’s Tours*), *Sensorama*, *Cinerama*, *The Aspen Movie Map* and *The Sword of Damocles*. Research into these and other technological experiences is advised for a wider understanding of the history of VR.

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^[5] Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," in *The Cinema of*

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^[6] Ibid.

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^[14] Mannoni, "The phantasmagoria," 405-406.

^[15] Mannoni, "The phantasmagoria," 393.

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Note on Contributor

Merinda Staubli made her first horror films while studying a Bachelor of Film and Television at Swinburne University (2014). Her graduate film *Night Terrors* has screened and been a finalist in national and international film festivals (Monster Fest, A Night of Horror International Film Festival, Macabre Faire Film Festival, Ax Wound Film Festival, Peninsula Short Film Fest). She further pursued her academic interests by completing an Honours degree at The University of Melbourne (2015). Her Honours thesis was called 'Experiential Horror: The Reach of Horror Beyond the Cinema Screen'. She is currently in post-production with a short body horror film which will hopefully soon start its run on the festival circuit.

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