Cultural Daily

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Virtual Reality's Impact on Culture

Shelly Schiff · Wednesday, July 7th, 2021

Virtual reality (VR) is a technology that creates immersive artificial worlds. It is a computer-generated simulation where people can interact in a 3D environment using electronic devices. Though this concept has been around since the 19th century, advanced VR headsets only became widely available in 2016. At that time, over 230 companies were working on these kinds of products. That included massive brands such as Apple, Google, Facebook, and Amazon.

While most generally associate VR with the gaming industry, it is a technology with vast applications that is slowly seeping into multiple facets of life, reshaping how we develop and interact. Year on year, its effects on culture are expanding. Thus, below, we analyze a few areas where it has found an implementation that inadvertently influences society.

Virtual Worlds Redefine Socialization & Art

Non-fungible tokens (NFTs) are the hot trend of 2021. They are units of data or unique virtual assets stored on a digital ledger referred to as a blockchain. They came into existence in 2014 but started to gain steam in 2020, only to blow up in early 2021 when the musician Grimes managed to sell ten pieces of digital art for close to $6 million on the auction platform Nifty Gateway. From then on, multiple artists jumped on this trend. Kings of Leon are now selling their new album – When You See Yourself as an NFT, and the artist Beeple successfully auctioned off a digital collage for a staggering $69 million.

However, what is interesting about the NFT boom is that it gave rise to metaverses, which are shared virtual spaces where users, through an avatar, can interact and transact with each other via fungible and non-fungible tokens. The most popular such worlds are the Sandbox, Decentraland, Axie Infinity, and Somnium Space. These are 3D environments that anyone with a VR headset and an internet connection can traverse. They feature many of the same cultural establishments as those available in the real world, Meaning, museums, concert venues, nightclubs, and more. They even welcome investments by offering real-estate and business opportunities. In Decentraland, for example, users can build and own a fully operational casino and offer an enhanced version of live dealer blackjack. So, little separates these virtual worlds from the real thing. Yet, due to their unique setting and economy, they nourish new communication methods and interpersonal relationships.

VR Aids in Understanding Cultural Differences

In 2018, North Carolina State University ran a project which gave engineering students a chance to

discover the cultural assumptions that guide business communication. The project got funded through a grant for the innovative use of technology given to the university's Distance Education and Learning Technology Applications unit. It aimed to develop custom training for business people, as teaching cultural competency is a long-standing aspect of the university's Global Training Initiative.

The project consisted of a workshop that featured a virtual meeting between people from China, Singapore, India, and the US where tensions arise. In the first section of the workshop, the participants observe the gathering happening in a Chinese office through a VR headset. In the second section, they get assigned a role as one of the people in the room, assuming the first-person perspective. During several periods throughout the meeting, the action stopped, and the participants could hear the thoughts of their alternate selves. These stop-action vignettes reveal the cultural assumptions present in the communication first-hand and how they influence interaction.

According to the project's lead, Ilin Misaras, the use of VR technology in this and similar exercises is paramount because experiencing an event through another person's eyes and hearing their thoughts can help build empathy. After the workshop, participants were able to argue the points of their assigned character more strongly. Therefore, the use of VR for scenario-based experiences can have vast implementations and help in relationship building.

Virtual Reality Is Revolutionizing Interpersonal Skill Development

When discussing cultural diversity and VR, it is interesting to note that the US Department of Defense incorporates VR-based exercises that enable military personnel to function in culturally complex environments via simulated experiences. Corporate juggernauts such as Procter & Gamble utilize a similar approach via VR to reinforce an empathic and inclusive corporate culture by providing true-to-life discrimination experiences.

Virtual reality technology as an educational tool does not only have the function to bring an added visual aspect to the learning process. Its objectives are also to help trainees/students improve their communicational skills and emotional intelligence, among other things. A growth mindset needs an open-minded educational context that is flexible. Only in such a space can trainees/students learn as much about themselves as the challenges they are trying to overcome. A virtual reality setting can help them discover their capability to bend in different situations en route to growing into individuals that can function better with others.

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