Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Women Should Leap Into Virtual Reality Development

Daphne Stanford · Wednesday, May 18th, 2016

Women can and should get involved with virtual reality development. A big reason to be a part of this technology, as it grows, is to help shape the role of women in relation to VR. The media seems fixated on two distinct narratives, so far: the first portrays women as potential victims, either in terms of user experience and subject matter; the other focuses on ample opportunities for women to get involved with VR, on the level of programming and development. Considering the relative newness of VR and the possibilities for entrepreneurs and programmers to get involved with this new technology, there are a number of gender-related factors that deserve consideration.

A few exciting new developments in uses for VR are particularly ripe for potential, including virtual painting and design, virtual reporting, and virtual teaching spaces for health care and medical education. Here's more information about how women can get involved with virtual reality while it's still on the ground floor of development and possibilities.

Virtual Education

There's been a lot of talk about innovation in education, lately—especially when it comes to online classes and the new model of education from anywhere. However, it's important to realize that online education has evolved beyond instant messenger programs, Internet browsers, and email. For example, there are engineering classes at Arizona State University with game-based simulations that present realistic scenarios offering students the opportunity to problem-solve in highly-realistic circumstances. Considering the number of women who teach at the secondary or university level, I'd say that education is an industry worthy of attention.

There are also healthcare innovation classes that teach doctoral, nursing, and healthcare students the skills necessary to be innovative. Jim Flinn, CEO of OASIS Hospital, stresses that "The landscape is ever-changing… Leaders must be prepared to think beyond the traditional paradigms that have led us to where we are today." A transformation of traditional paradigms, these days, includes not only innovations such as game-based learning and virtual or augmented reality in the medical classroom—as has been implemented at colleges and teaching hospitals like Torbay Hospital in South Devon—but also crucial developments such as healthcare informatics and the streamlining of databases with vital patient information allowing doctors and pharmacists to communicate seamlessly with each other.

It's of critical importance that healthcare systems revamp their patient information and prescription data centers, and here's one reason why: NPR recently reported that medical errors are the third leading cause of death in the United States, stating that "Medical mistakes that can lead to death range from surgical complications that go unrecognized to mix-ups with the doses or types or medications patients receive." This is all the more reason to support the implementation of total patient record integration and the streamlining of data-based information via databases and other informatics-related programs via staff who are fully up to speed with a variety of database systems

and pharmacy informatics.

Virtual Art & Design

When I refer to virtual design, I'm referring to the relatively new virtual reality application of virtual painting and design, as demonstrated via a new Google app called Tilt Brush designed for the HTC Vive. The opportunities for this application are diverse: from creating paintings and sculptures in virtual space to utilizing the app for fashion and visual design purposes—say for budding architects, or for interior and fashion designers.

The art world has gone so far as to put on a VR-based gallery exhibit, essentially creating a new medium for painting in the process. Gretchen Andrew is an artist who used to be immersed in the tech world via her position at Google, where she worked in the internal products department, but then she decided that the tech life wasn't for her, so she moved to London and took up painting full time. During this time, she began to learn "the extent to which she can use emerging technologies and [their] discoveries to impact the art world."

Andrew proceeded to have an art exhibition based on her artwork created with the help of virtual reality technology—but she's not the only one. Interestingly enough, both art exhibits claimed to be "the world's first virtual reality art exhibition," though perhaps that announcement came as a result of the slow, faulty timing of art exhibits in general. In any case, virtual painting technology has a number of potential uses, including interior design, architecture, engineering, fashion design, city planning, and fine art.

Virtual Reportage

Reporting has been going through some growing pains for, oh, the last twenty years or so—largely because of the growth of Internet reporting and the slow death of the physical newspaper. Despite this transition from the physical to the digital world, reportage and journalism are alive and well: they're simply taking on different forms. One of these is virtual reality—so much so that *The New York Times* is developing an entirely new vehicle for reporting news, and the vehicle is VR.

One major reason behind the use of VR—also known as *immersive journalism*—is that it builds feelings of empathy in the viewer. For many issues such as homelessness or widespread refugee displacement, the ability to experience the world from the perspective of the people involved allows readers and Internet users the ability to truly understand the situation in a way that feels much more real than traditional reportage.

One pioneer in this field is Nonny de la Peña, whose ideas on immersive journalism first surfaced in 2010 and became the foundation for what *The New York Times* is launching soon with their NYT VR-based series. De la Peña created a film called *Hunger in Los Angeles* that debuted at Sundance Film Festival in 2012 and garnered quite a bit of national attention. However, homelessness in Los Angeles and elsewhere—such as the Bay Area—continues to be persistent and chronic in nature. Because of this, other journalists and social justice advocates are creating similar VR-based, immersive-journalism documentaries in order to help combat widespread apathy and ignorance about this complex, ongoing issue.

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Contrary to popular belief, women have been instrumental to the history of VR: from discovery and expansion to rise and development; however, more of us are needed to help catapult the technology to more inclusive and diversified purposes. Let the leaping begin!

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Image Source: Flickr/Fabrice Florin

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