

Chapter 13



VIRTUAL EMPATHY



What's the Trend?

The decreasing cost and growing quality of virtual reality is allowing creators tell more immersive stories and people see the world from another point of view – growing their empathy in the process.

It would be hard to read any prediction about the future of the entertainment industry without enduring yet another breathless description of how virtual reality (VR) is a game changer. In a recent interview 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment President Mike Dunn illustrated the point perfectly. “VR is not a gimmick or a marketing addendum to a film,” he said “but the studio’s No. 1 priority in home entertainment.”

Dunn’s comments may reflect an overload of optimism, but there have been plenty of signs over the past year that virtual reality is on the edge of becoming widely available and perhaps even mainstream.

In mid-2015, the “Cardboard” device released by Google allowed consumers to experience a crude version of VR directly from their smartphones with a simple viewing device built out of cardboard. Several months later, Samsung released its first consumer Virtual Reality Headset

called the Gear VR at the consumer friendly price under \$100 USD and designed to work with existing Samsung mobile phones.

Oculus Rift, the pioneer in virtual reality technology that was acquired by Facebook in 2014 for an estimated \$2 billion, continues to pioneer new content experiences and also to power the forces of many efforts from brands like Fox, Lionsgate and Samsung.

With all this investment, it is tempting to see Virtual Reality only as a technology with the potential to transform how we are entertained – and it will certainly do that. The wider implications of the technology, though, are far more ... human. When the technology for experiencing the world through someone else's eyes is within arm's reach of the masses – then empathy too can become easier to enable.

More than one enthusiast has referred to Virtual Reality as the world's greatest empathy machine, with the potential to help each of us better understand people not like ourselves, sympathize with those in the world who live in poverty or under threat of war, better appreciate and protect our environment and maybe even make ourselves into better humans. Sound like a dream? In this chapter, we will see just how much of this utopian vision for *Virtual Empathy* is already on the way to coming true.

If You Chop a Tree in a Forest, Do You Use Less Paper?

At the Stanford University Virtual Human Interaction Lab, one of the world's foremost research teams studying how virtual reality impacts human behavior have uncovered some surprising insights. As lab director Jeremy Bailenson shares “we are entering an era that is unprecedented in human history, where you can transform the self and experience anything the animator can fathom.” These experiences are already taking an unexpected turn.

In one experiment, for example, Bailenson and his team invited participants to wear a headset and crawl around on their hands and knees while the simulator created a virtual mirror in which the participants saw themselves as a cow. The intriguing question the research posed was, “if you know how a cow feels, will you eat less meat?”

To find out, participants were prodded with a stick while experiencing the same treatment in the virtual reality headset as a cow being led to its own slaughter. After the experiment, one participant summarized the experience by writing “once I got used to it I began to feel like I was the cow. I truly felt like I was going to the slaughter house towards the end and I felt sad that I (as a cow) was going to die. That last prod felt really sad.”

Far from starting with an agenda of converting people to become vegetarians or build their capacity for bovine sympathy, though, Bailenson was simply interested in whether experiencing a situation *virtually* was enough to alter behavior in *reality*.

No matter what experiment he devised, the answer always turned out the same. Does seeing a 65-year-old avatar of yourself inspire you to save more for retirement? Yes. Does virtually chopping down a tree (and hearing it fall) make you more likely to use less paper? Yes.

The implication of his team’s research is significant. We as humans can learn to have more empathy toward others, animals and the environment through immersive virtual reality experiences. Particularly when those experiences are crafted into a powerful story of a part of the world most of us would never get to see otherwise.

The Rise Of Immersive Journalism

In February of 2015 at the World Economic Forum in Davos, more than 120 top diplomats waited patiently in line to wear a Samsung Gear VR headset and experience a war zone first hand. The “film” they were waiting to see was in fact a collaboration dreamed up by filmmaker and virtual reality pioneer Chris Milk with UN senior advisor and self-described “bureaucratic ninja” Gabo Arora.

After first being introduced by U2 guitarist the Edge at a music album launch party, the two quickly dreamed up a collaboration to develop an eight minute short film called *Clouds Over Sidra* that would generate more understanding for the Syrian refugee crisis by letting the viewer experience the world through the eyes of a twelve year old girl named Sidra living amongst 80,000 fellow refugees from the Za’atari camp in Jordan.

Efforts like this are leading to a growing renaissance of what many are starting to describe as “immersive journalism” – a new form where journalists can do things like sharing the untold plight of marginalized groups through a combination of investigative reporting and on the ground humanitarianism.

Other powerful efforts launched in the past year take you into what it feels like to be a perpetrator of a sexual assault crime (*The Party*), experience the strange sensation of swapping your gender (*Machine To Be Another*) and even engage in a virtual reality business negotiation scenario where you are forced to play both roles in order to illustrate the importance of compassion in effective negotiations (*Harvard University*).

The New York Times even launched a large scale experiment with Google Cardboard where the newspaper shipped the cardboard lenses to subscribers and invited them to download a custom app in order to “simulate richly immersive scenes from across the globe.”

Outside of immersive journalism and telling important stories, virtual reality is also changing how we deliver quality healthcare and also the role of empathy in the business world.

Empathetic Health

Back in 2005 when Dr. Albert Rizzo first developed his virtual reality software designed to help soldiers experiencing PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder) symptoms, he had a device problem. The virtual reality headsets he was using at the time cost nearly \$1600 apiece. Today, these costs have come down dramatically as VR headsets like the Samsung Gear take advantage of the complex gyroscope and accelerometer that you have already paid for inside your mobile phone.

Now that cost is no longer the biggest barrier, Dr. Rizzo is among a growing range of clinicians and healthcare professionals who believe that VR will fundamentally transform many elements of how health care is delivered today.

There are plenty of signs that their belief is well on its way to coming true. Loyola University is using virtual reality to test a game called “Snow World” which allows burn victims to play a mental game shooting

snowballs at penguins and snowmen while undergoing extremely painful treatments like skin stretching therapy.

In San Francisco, a virtual reality startup called Psious is pioneering a new virtual reality based version of exposure therapy designed to help individuals conquer all sorts of fears – from public speaking to an anxiety when flying. Researchers are using similar methods to help children with autism more easily learn social cues and interaction.

On the other side of healthcare, medical students like surgery residents and dental surgeons also now have the ability to learn and practice techniques through virtual simulations – even allowing them to navigate tricky complications in a safe learning environment or even to see a procedure from a patient's point of view.

Other industries are finding new value from testing VR as well.

Focus Groups of the Future

For the past 15 years, Ford Motor Company has been using virtual reality technology without much fanfare to develop and test designs before they are built. As Ford technical specialist Elizabeth Baron explained in a recent *Forbes* interview, “what we’re looking for is the perceived quality of vehicles as a customer would see them. We want to be able to see the cars and our designs and experience them before we have actually produced them.” Baron estimates in the past year that the technology has been used to examine more than 135,000 details on 193 virtual vehicle prototypes in a variety of lighting situations, positions and shapes.

In January at the Detroit auto show, the brand unveiled plans for the new Ford GT – a “supercar” with a top speed of 200 miles per hour meant to challenge the offerings from top exotic car makers like Ferrari and McLaren. The project was one of the first to come from the secretive Ford Performance team, a small group of engineers and designers nestled in an intentionally separate facility in Ford's Dearborn, Michigan headquarters. The majority of early conception of the car, as well understanding how the car would interact with the driver was largely created digitally through VR.

In the business world, this type of simulation using VR in order to empathize with how real people will interact with multi-million dollar

structures is becoming commonplace. A virtual reality studio called Third Fate is one example – in 2015 the firm opened a B2B practice designed specifically to work with architects and businesses to create VR renderings of spaces that could be imagined and explored prior to ever starting construction.

Virtual reality software company WorldViz has one of the most popular platforms for businesses to develop these types of renderings of spaces and products. The company's VR software development platform Vizard is used by architects and designers to imagine spaces, create safe equipment maintenance training scenarios for oil and gas industry workers and even given surgeons and nurses the chance to criticize planned hospital room designs before those rooms are completed. Each offers the chance for those designing spaces for professionals to build their empathy towards their end users and actually take the input of the users in real time and use it to make their designs more functional.

Outside of designing spaces or products, virtual reality is also starting to find its way into more social aspects of business as well. New programs are coming up to allow directors to use VR as a part of the recruiting and interviewing process. Others are using VR headsets to enable better collaboration and understanding between remotely dispersed teams and even to teach interpersonal communications by helping workers build empathy for understanding different points of view.

Why It Matters

As Oculus Rift, Samsung and others challengers continue to bring more consumer friendly and lower priced devices to market, virtual reality will continue to give us all more ways to step outside ourselves and experience the world from another point of view. Entertainment and gaming will likely continue to get the biggest share of attention and excitement, however the transformative nature of virtual reality will continue to hinge on its ability to allow each of us as humans to empathize with more people and situations than ever before. At the very least – we will continue to enjoy more immersive entertainment experiences throughout 2016.

More promisingly, the growth of virtual reality has the potential to even make us into better humans in the process.

Who Should Use This Trend?

If you happen to work for a smaller brand or one without a secret in house lab then this trend focused on using virtual reality to build empathy may seem like its nice to know about but out of touch in reality. While the simulation usages of VR for things like testing prototypes of architectural plans or automotive designs certainly are more extreme models, you don't need to be prototyping innovation in order to potentially use this trend. One of the most powerful and transformative effects of the technology is in the way that it challenges each of us to see outside our own biases and limited viewpoints of the world.

To that end, any business that wants to encourage its workers to reduce industry-induced tunnel vision, to have more empathy for customers or one that just wants to give workers a chance to open their minds to new innovative possibilities could benefit from using VR. The good news is, there are plenty of readily available new programs and tools that are being built for VR that reduce the necessity for you to have to build something yourself. While many offerings for VR today might be quite entertainment driven, the lessons they offer can be useful for businesses of all kinds ... and the near future will see more specific programs to encourage more empathy in business during tasks like hiring, firing, negotiations, sales and plenty more.

How To Use This Trend

- ✓ **Invest in your own VR micro-lab** – The word “lab” typically conjures up images of expensive pristine rooms filled with scientists, but today with a minimal investment of \$500 to \$1000 – you can purchase a range of interesting and new gear to try out, and then encourage your teams to just come in and play. The value of new technology often comes from the

ideas it might spark for doing businesses differently in your industry. And at the very least, playing with new tech toys can offer an always appreciated jolt of energy and excitement to a routine day.

- ✓ **Make it a priority to personally test out “real” VR** – Aside from playing with the small limited VR experiences currently available for home use, there are plenty of new showcases of the full power of VR that are happening in places like co-working or incubator spaces in large cities, expo halls at tech trade shows or on University campuses. VR, like many different new technologies, is best understood by actually donning a headset and traveling into the experience yourself.