

The Last Platform

Alexander Provan

What it's like to stand on the precipice of virtual reality



1
Oculus Rift headset,
2015

2
Jeremy Couillard
The Out of Body Experience, 2015,
virtual-reality simulation

Courtesy
1 Oculus • 2 the artist

I load the YouTube videos of early adopters with headsets strapped to their faces. Within a few moments, they begin to squeal, curse, flap their arms, jerk their heads and, occasionally, stumble to the floor. They feel themselves to be piloting fighter jets, careering across wooden tracks in a rollercoaster, or standing at the edge of a canyon so artfully contrived as to make their stomachs clench. Their cerebral cortexes seem to peel away from their bodies, which makes them look ridiculous, and also makes me think: *I need to try this.*

The last time I experienced even an approximation of virtual reality was at the age of 12, when my joystick-weaned neighbour was given Nintendo's Virtual Boy as

a gift from his parents. We retreated to his basement and donned the cumbersome plastic headset, which submerged us in a realm of rapidly refreshing LED lights and three shades of red. We played Mario's Tennis until our heads ached and our measly spines were on the verge of collapse. The next-generation headsets in the YouTube videos are made by Silicon Valley start-up Oculus VR, and look like rectangular welders' goggles refashioned by Alexander Wang. When the ride is over and the users unveil themselves, they appear startled, discombobulated, cross-eyed. 'How'd they put this in here?' one exclaims.

According to Mark Zuckerberg, who in 2014 directed Facebook to

purchase Oculus for \$US 2 billion, virtual reality will 'empower people to experience anything' and may very well be 'the last platform'. While this language sounds mildly apocalyptic, the business plan is merely the supercession of our current phenomenological experiences: sitting and staring at screens, clicking and mousing with aching fingers to manipulate representations of data. The Oculus Rift, scheduled for commercial release this month, portends a 'natural interface' in which all markers of mediation evanesce. No tools, no icons, no windows, no swiping or pinching; you behave exactly as you otherwise would, but you inhabit the body of another person or bacterium; you drag

race on Mars or crawl the ocean floor; you copulate without consequence or go to work without getting out of bed.

In his essay 'The Ultimate Display' (1965), computer scientist Ivan Sutherland eagerly described an interface that would deliver a room 'within which the computer can control the existence of matter', such that virtual handcuffs would be confining and virtual bullets fatal. All sense of artifice would disappear. But late-20th-century VR experiments failed to migrate beyond the heavily funded realms of NASA and DARPA. Now, thanks to the enormous market for gaming systems and various technological advances, the VR fantasy seems to be on the verge of fulfilment. VR systems are being trumpeted as tools for treating injuries, post-traumatic stress disorder, fear of public speaking and training surgeons, astronauts or football players. Gaming companies and film studios promise to engross viewers and elicit visceral and emotional responses. Facebook plans to pivot toward 'immersive videos', if not telepresence.

At the same time, artists like Ian Cheng, Jon Rafman, Jacobly Satterwhite and Daniel Steegmann Mangrané have recently exhibited

works designed (or adapted) for the Rift. Artist and programmer Rachel Rossin, the inaugural Virtual Reality Fellow at New Inc., the New York New Museum's incubator and workspace, says that VR enthusiasts are split into two factions: those who believe that it is an 'empathy machine' that will colonize journalism, film and marketing; and those who exhilarate in the exploration not only of virtual environments but the phenomenological experiences that occur in them – and, ultimately, the way we understand ourselves in relation to those experiences. Rossin recently showed me *I Came and Went as a Ghost Hand* (2015), a sparsely populated realm of meshes and textures elaborated from images of her home, studio and paintings, all designed for the Rift. I swivelled in my chair and cautiously rotated my head as a white-gloved hand conveyed me through the simulation. I gradually lost awareness of the cords that linked my head to the computer and found myself increasingly absorbed despite the purposeful artificiality of the environment, in which fragments of images have been shorn from Rossin's everyday life and then slotted into grids and mapped onto the models that constitute video games.

Jeremy Couillard, another artist who works with VR, is similarly focused on the disjunctions between what we perceive and what we feel to be real, but also on the possibility of legitimate transcendence. His Rift simulation, *The Out of Body Experience* (2015), is informed by Bob Monroe, who developed a quixotic programme for controlling consciousness in order to journey beyond space, time and death – making him the perfect avatar for VR. When I began the simulation, I was seated in a featureless room and inhabiting an alien body, while incomprehensible incantations were whispered into my ears. Soon, I departed the body, floated up a stairwell, burst through a portal and was deposited into a desert landscape strewn with cartoonish creatures and fragments of video-game architecture: swaying saguaro cacti, desiccated grass, polished tile floors. The whistles of orbiting birds melded with synth swells in the binaural soundtrack, and my stomach momentarily shot towards my throat as I dropped down a cursorily rendered cliff. Again, despite the disregard for realism, I was engrossed.

I was also relieved. After reading so many slavering articles,

I had come to think of VR as the apotheosis of linear perspective, measuring space and quantifying nature to create an image of the world which seems so immediate and transparent that the medium is effectively erased. But Couillard's and Rossin's works unabashedly disclose layer upon layer of mediation and turn the dream of the natural interface into a joke about accessing the unconscious, which has been converted into a storehouse of internet imagery and video-game archetypes.

Of course, the creation of individual artworks that meaningfully reflect on the medium will not extinguish corporations' rhapsodic visions of computers generating immersive environments so indistinguishable from the real world as to drain that concept of meaning. Michael Abrash, the chief scientist at Oculus, recently credited his faith in VR to the lecture delivered by Morpheus in *The Matrix* (1999) about the nature of consciousness: you glean a minimal amount of data from your environment in the form of electrical signals, which your brain uses to construct a convincing illusion, which means that nothing is real! We are 'inference machines' and not 'objective observers of the world', Abrash said to a crowd of Facebook developers. As such, we can – and, therefore, should – use technology to construct experiences that, for all intents and purposes, count as reality.

The rhetoric of Abrash and his cohort has as much to do with religion as vision. Computers long ago set us on the path to liberation from our bodies and a world of our own making. How could we not pursue such salvation? As the philosopher Bruno Latour has observed, the fundamental move of science is the conversion of nature into a diagram we can comprehend. But never before have diagrams yielded images so fantastic, so convincingly natural, that our bodies might confuse them for what they picture. What will we do with these images now that we have them, and what will they do to us?

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