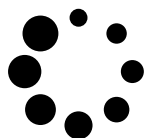


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by Philippe Bédard

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You Are Not Alone: The Role of VR and Immersive Content in Social Impact Campaigns



PHILIPPE BÉDARD, McGill University – <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4100-5249>

Abstract

This article focuses on the use of virtual reality (VR) in the context of “impact campaigns.” Distinct in many ways from publishing a project on a digital storefront, impact campaigns assume a more carefully designed experience, starting with the exhibit itself. Rather than considering VR as an end in itself, my goal is to situate this unique type of mediated experience within a larger network of social activism. Key to this project is an understanding of the role documentary films have played within societal movements. By learning from the larger history of impact production, this article seeks to highlight some of the shortcomings with VR as it has been used until now in socially minded projects. By extension, my goal is also to emphasize the things VR creators can learn from impact producers to make sure their projects reach the right audiences and affect them accordingly.

Keywords

[Virtual reality](#)

[Impact production](#)

[Documentary](#)

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Introduction

As is common with technological developments in the field of media and technology, virtual reality (VR) has been the topic of dystopian critiques and utopian promises alike. In either extreme, the technology's power to create strong and lasting emotional impact has been a major point of discussion. Invested in the idea that media in general might be used for societal change, this article is focused on understanding why VR has so often been discussed in terms of a transformational tool, namely as an empathy machine.¹ More importantly, in what follows I want to go beyond the usual critique of the empathy machine discourse by focusing on elements beyond the VR experience itself: the way a VR project is exhibited, how it is experienced, and everything that happens before or after that might affect or make use of VR.

To better highlight the role VR experiences play in fostering positive transformational effects, this article considers their inclusion within the larger context of "impact campaigns." This means that rather than considering VR as an end in itself, my goal is to situate this unique type of mediated experience within a larger network of social activism.² Key to this project is an understanding of the role

1 On the issue of empathy in VR, see G. Bollmer, "Empathy Machines," *Media International Australia* 165, no. 1 (2017), 63-76, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X17726794>; J.A. Fisher, "Empathic Actualities: Toward a Taxonomy of Empathy in Virtual Reality," in *Interactive Storytelling: 10th International Conference on Interactive Digital Storytelling* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 233-244; E. Ramirez, "Empathy and the Limits of Thought Experiments," *Metaphilosophy* 48, no. (2017), 504-526, <https://doi.org/10.1111/meta.12249>; H. Farmer, "A Broken Empathy Machine," *Immerse* (2019), <https://immerse.news/a-broken-empathy-machine-can-virtual-reality-increase-pro-social-behaviour-and-reduce-prejudice-cbcefb30525b>; L. Nakamura, "Feeling Good About Feeling Bad: Virtuous Virtual Reality and the Automation of Racial Empathy," *Journal of Visual Culture* 19, no. 1 (2020), 47-64, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412920906259>; G. Raz, "Rage Against the Empathy Machine Revisited: The Ethics of Empathy-Related Affordances of Virtual Reality," *Convergence* 28, no. 5 (2022): 1457-1475, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565221086406>; P. Bédard, "Closing the Gap: Storytelling in Nonfiction Virtual Reality," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 32, no. 1 (2023), 87-105; P. Bédard, "Making Room for Empathy in Contemporary Virtual Reality Cinema," *Studies in Documentary Film* 18, no. 1 (2023), 34-52.

2 While some might argue that VR and other immersive media seek to remove traces of their mediation by aiming towards transparency and perceptual immediacy, this issue is not relevant to the present discussion on impact campaigns. It is, however, relevant within the larger context of using immersive media for non-fiction storytelling. See K. Nash, "Virtual Reality Witness: Exploring the Ethics of Mediated Presence," *Studies in Documentary Film* 12, no. 2 (2018): 119-131, 124, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17503280.2017.1340796>.

documentary films have played within societal movements. Specifically, when considering the notion of impact, it is crucial to appreciate the role pieces of media should play as “just one element (albeit a central one) in a strategic communication project.”³

Making suggestions as to the proper way of designing an impact campaign is beyond the scope of this essay. Rather, my goal is to highlight the broad field of considerations within which immersive experiences geared toward social issues need to be thought. Starting with an overview of VR’s oft-cited emotional impact, this article continues by highlighting aspects of that discussion that are not as often considered. This includes examples of negative emotional consequences VR is capable of fostering, as well as critiques of the necessity and merit of emotional effects alone. This is where the notion of “impact” comes in, as a process dependant on channelling raw emotions into meaningful action. Looking at the historical development of documentary as a component of activist movements, it becomes clear that a more thoughtful understanding of what VR can *do* is needed to fully appreciate the role it can play in more robust transformational projects.

A single piece of VR content serves as a through line in this article. *On the Morning You Wake (to the End of the World)* (Mike Brett, Steve Jamison, Arnaud Colinart, and Pierre Zandrowicz, 2022) is a 38-minute experience which deals with the morning of January 13th, 2018, when the 1.4 million inhabitants of Hawai’i received an alert warning them that a ballistic missile was inbound. Published for free on the Meta Quest digital storefront, the project was also part of two recent exhibits: an immersive exhibit in Montreal and an impact campaign with a stop in New York.⁴ Analyses of the lone VR experience and both exhibits punctuate

3 K. Nash, J. Corner, “Strategic Impact Documentary: Contexts of Production and Social Intervention,” *European Journal of Communication* 31, no. 3 (2016), 227-242, 231, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323116635831>.

4 Considering the project was also the subject of a whitepaper on the power of VR in impact design, this makes it a vital example. See J. Plass, “Deepening Engagement and Learning Impact Through Virtual Reality Activations,” *Games for Change* (2023), <https://www.gamesforchange.org/xr4c/>

this article. They serve to give concrete examples of VR's emotional impact and of the steps impact campaigns can take to channel this energy. In parallel, the solitary nature of VR is contrasted to the communal experience offered by these larger exhibits, highlighting the fact that impact is best achieved together, rather than alone.

Emotion

The inciting incident behind *On the Morning You Wake (OTMYW)* is summarized thusly on the project's website:

On the morning of January 13th, 2018, an alert was issued to every citizen of Hawai'i:

BALLISTIC MISSILE THREAT INBOUND TO HAWAII.

SEEK IMMEDIATE SHELTER. THIS IS NOT A DRILL.⁵

5 <https://www.onthemorningyouwake.com/#story>

What emotions do you feel reading those lines? Now imagine that you saw a picture of what that alert looked like on a phone that morning (Fig. 1), or that you heard it from a stranger (Fig. 2), or perhaps loved one who received it. What if you experienced a simulation of the event (Fig. 3)? Would each experience foster different emotions? Otherwise, would they simply evoke different degrees of intensity of the same emotional reaction?

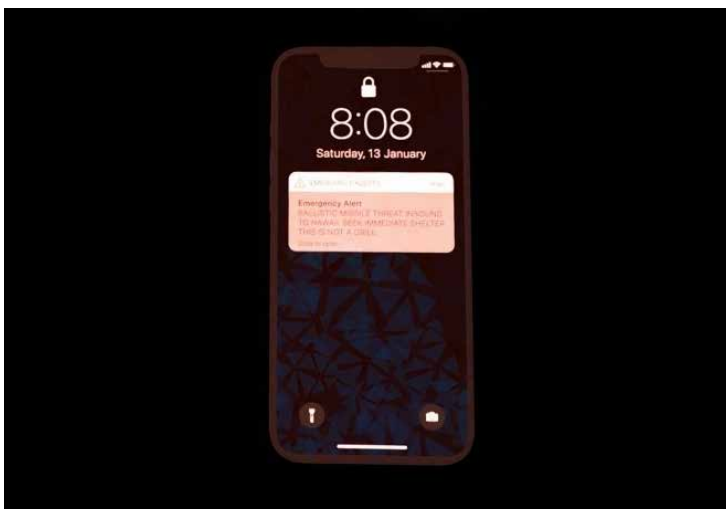
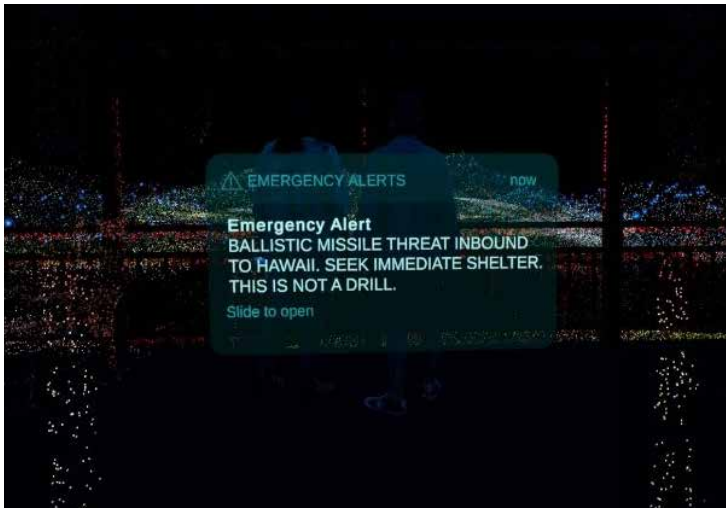


Fig. 1-3 – Screenshots for the Meta Quest store release of *On the Morning You Wake (to the End of the World)*. Clockwise: Fig. 1 shows the reproduction of the alert alone. Fig. 2 shows a character receiving the alert at a point in the story where its contents are not known yet. Finally, Fig. 3 simulates the experience by having the user's right-hand controller vibrate to show the same alert on "their phone," all while characters are telling us about their experience.

If studies on the psychological impact of VR are to be believed, the more immersive and interactive experiences enabled by this technology result in more intensely felt emotions. This is summarized by Plass *et al.* in their case study of *OTMYW*, where they write that research shows "content screened in a VR headset has a greater emotional impact on participants than when screened on

a 2D interface.”⁶ In some cases, empathy is invoked as the reason why VR is such a potent vehicle for emotional impact.⁷ Often, the perspective switching power that VR affords its users is highlighted as a source of this empathy.⁸ In other cases, the simulative aspect of VR is put forth as a key factor, since putting users in a fictional context and allowing them to experience events “first-hand” can evoke the same reactions as if the experience were genuine. This is also why some studies have focused on VR for use in exposure therapy.⁹

Another hypothesis might be that emotional valence is tied to the higher degree of sensory stimulation – perhaps we could even say the verisimilitude – that VR offers over previous forms of media that were tied to the written or spoken word (e.g. press, biographies, memoirs, testimonies, oral histories, etc.), to audiovisual stimuli (i.e. cinema, etc.), or to interaction (i.e. video games). VR currently builds on all of these by including elements of text, sounds, images and interactivity. It goes one step further still by also integrating a convincing sense of presence,¹⁰ which gives users the illusion that they are witnessing – or even experiencing – events themselves. This is in contrast

6 J. Plass *et al.*, *Deepening Engagement and Learning Impact Through Virtual Reality Activations* (Games for Change, 2023), 6, <https://www.gamesforchange.org/xr4c/>

7 On empathy, see C.D. Batson, “These Things Called Empathy: Eight Related but Distinct Phenomena,” in J. Decety, W. Ickes, eds., *The Social Neuroscience of Empathy* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2009), 3-16.

8 A. Avenanti, A. Sirigu, S.M. Aglioti, “Racial Bias Reduces Empathic Sensorimotor Resonance with Other-Race Pain,” *Current Biology* 20, no. 11 (2010), 1018-1022, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2010.03.071>; D. Banakou, P.D Hanumanthu, M. Slater, “Virtual Embodiment of White People in a Black Virtual Body Leads to a Sustained Reduction in Their Implicit Racial Bias,” *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 10, no. 601 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2016.00601>; P. Bertrand *et al.*, “Learning Empathy Through Virtual Reality: Multiple Strategies for Training Empathy-Related Abilities Using Body Ownership Illusions in Embodied Virtual Reality,” *Frontiers in Robotics and AI* 5, no. 26 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.3389/frobt.2018.00026>.

9 See T.D. Parsons, A.A. Rizzo, “Affective Outcomes of Virtual Reality Exposure Therapy for Anxiety and Specific Phobias: A Meta-Analysis,” *Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry* 39, no. 3 (2008), 250-261, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbtep.2007.07.007>; K. Meyerbröker, P.M.G. Emmelkamp, “Virtual Reality Exposure Therapy in Anxiety Disorders: A Systematic Review of Process-and-Outcome Studies,” *Depression and Anxiety* 27, no. 10 (2010), 933-944, <https://doi.org/10.1002/da.20734>; D. Opris *et al.* “Virtual Reality Exposure Therapy in Anxiety Disorders: A Quantitative Meta-Analysis,” *Depression and Anxiety* 29, no. 2 (2012), 85-93, <https://doi.org/10.1002/da.20910>.

10 On presence, see M. Lombard, T. Ditton, “At the Heart of It All: The Concept of Presence,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 3, no. 2 (1997), <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.1997.tb00072.x>.

to other forms of non-fiction media which make the mediation process more apparent.¹¹

Whatever the case may be for VR's psychological or emotional impact, the results of such studies are brandished by creators and stakeholders in the VR industry as proof of VR's capacity to evoke powerful emotional reactions and, by extension, to encourage positive social change. This is what the idea of VR as an empathy machine embodies. Of course, this is not the first time media has been touted for its ability to emotionally impacts audiences. Caty Borum Chattoo makes a similar argument in relation to documentary film, for instance, describing emotion as "perhaps the most potent mechanism by which humans respond to the world. [...] When contemplating documentary's ability to spark motivated political action from an audience, for example, *emotional response lies at the fore*."¹² Although other forms of non-fiction media have been recognized for their ability to evoke powerful emotions, VR differs in the sheer number of research papers that have been published on its (usually) positive effects, the results of which have been taken up by those invested in using VR for positive social change.

With all due respect to those conducting studies on the psychological impact of VR, certain caveats must be pointed out before we can apply their findings to artistic experiences designed by well-meaning but often ill-equipped artists and which are experienced "in the wild," rather than in the controlled environment of a laboratory. How well does the emotional impact demonstrated in a psychological study translate to the real world? This challenge was taken up by the team behind *OTMYW*, who conducted a study on visitors who viewed the project in a variety of contexts. Using a series of surveys before and after viewing the experience (including a control group that watched on a tablet and a proportional sample that experienced it in

11 This appearance of non-mediation has been criticized in K. Nash, "Virtual Reality Witness: Exploring the Ethics of Mediated Presence," *Studies in Documentary Film* 12, no. 2 (2018): 119-131, 124, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17503280.2017.1340796>.

12 C.B. Chattoo, *Story Movements: How Documentaries Empower People and Inspire Social Change*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 8. Emphasis added.

VR), the team aimed to demonstrate how VR could be used to “deepen engagement and learning impact.” As they share in the report: “VR participants self-reported that they experienced emotions more intensely than participants in the 2D group by over 20%.”¹³ Elsewhere, the intensity of the emotions experiences is qualified as also relating to “positive and activating emotions (inspired and energized).”

These positive reactions should be taken with a grain of salt, however, and not extrapolated to VR as a whole. Readers should also be wary of taking this positive conclusion as the only possible result of viewing such an experience in VR. Indeed, there is much more that VR can foster than just these positive emotions. As Carles Sora-Domenjó demonstrates in a recent review of the psychological effects of VR, there are also plenty of negative effects that VR can produce, whether intentionally or not. Of particular interest for this paper is the notion of “empathic stress,” which can occur when users are asked to empathize with individuals in negative or potentially traumatic situations:

When empathetic distress is strong, it can lead to personal distress, creating anxiety, fatigue and other adverse feelings that act as a barrier to empathetic attitudes toward others. The focus of attention is shifted from the other to the self. It can even create a backlash effect in which the user may blame the other for creating such empathic feelings.¹⁴

The selective focus of the VR industry – choosing to flaunt the positive psychological effects of its technology while ignoring the negative ones – should not be discounted.

To illustrate the need for this broader appreciation of VR’s effect, consider the breadth of emotions

13 J. Plass *et al.*, *Deepening Engagement and Learning Impact Through Virtual Reality Activations*: 23.

14 C. Sora-Domenjó. “Disrupting the ‘Empathy Machine’: The Power and Perils of Virtual Reality in Addressing Social Issues,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 13, no. 814565 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.814565>. See also M.L. Hoffman, “The Contribution of Empathy to Justice and Moral Judgment,” in N. Eisenberg, J. Strayer, eds., *Empathy and its Development. Cambridge studies in social and emotional development* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 47-80; P. Bloom, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion* (New York: Ecco Press, 2016).

that can be triggered when experiencing *OTMYW*. Sitting at home with my Quest 2 headset on, I launch the project and start the first chapter. After a poetic introduction by Dr. Jamaica Heolimeleikalani Osorio, I am immediately immersed in representations of Hawai'i's stunning landscape, as individuals start to recount how the morning of January 13th, 2018 started: waking up, taking pictures of the sunrise, getting ready to go to work, etc. Each character vignette stops when they get an alert on their phone, the contents of which are not shared with me yet. It is only a few minutes later that my right controller vibrates to let me know that I have received that notification too: A missile is coming toward us and we have fifteen minutes to seek shelter. At this point in the VR experience, the story shares the reactions of each character: panic, anxiety, distress, horror, resentment. Panic over the impending attack. Anxiety over what one should be doing in such a situation. Distress when realizing there is nothing to be done, or when faced with one's inevitable death. Horror at the thought that the rest of the planet too might be facing nuclear annihilation. And finally, once it is discovered that this alert was a mistake, resentment at those in power that made the end of the world a very real possibility by continuing to stockpile weapons of mass destruction. These emotions are seen in character's faces and heard in their voices as they recount their experience. More importantly, I feel them viscerally when empathy allows me to feel for what these characters are going through. For instance, I feel a horrible sense of dread wash over me when hearing an eleven-year-old girl say: "I started sobbing because I didn't want to die." I start sobbing myself when another character – reminded of the aftermath of the bombings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki – wonders what the shadow she leaves behind after the blast will look like. The mere memory of her words is enough to send chills running down my spine. The effect is made worse by the fact that I could see a shadow of ash where I stood as she said those words (Fig. 4). The horror continues when a woman who survived the 1945 bombing describes seeing the flesh melting off people. Later, she

also tells me that after getting this alert, she would rather not be among the survivors.

By focusing on these negative emotions, my goal is not to suggest that *OTMYW* is entirely negative. In the project's third and final chapter, these emotions are re-directed toward the issue of denuclearization and to related concerns: military imperialism, colonialism, environmental concerns etc.

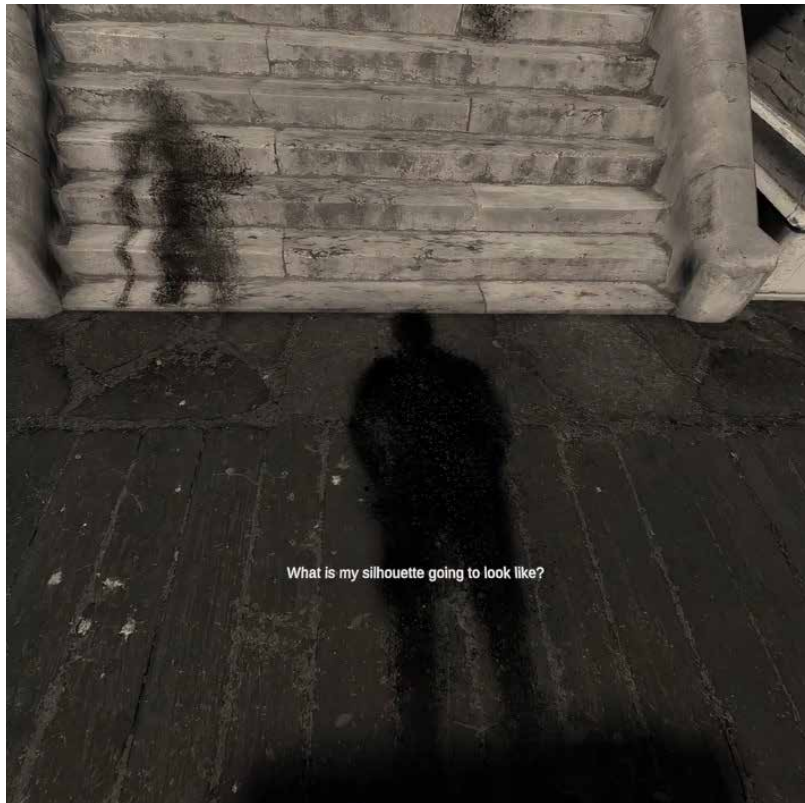


Fig. 4 – Screenshot: A character imagines what the shadow of ashes she leaves behind after being disintegrated by a nuclear blast will look like in *On the Morning You Wake (to the End of the World)*

More importantly, the title concludes with a morsel of hope and a call to action: “On the Morning You Wake to the end of the world,” the poem that introduced and punctuated the experience concludes, “your vision will be 20-20, so use it [...] And maybe, just maybe, the world might not have to end again, tomorrow.”

As this analysis aims to show, VR's powerful emotional impacts should not be understood only in positive terms. Conversely, these negative emotions do not necessarily take away from the project's potential impact. However, it should also be made clear that powerful emotions alone are not sufficient for bringing along social

change. Achieving this goal requires more structured efforts. This is where the notion of “impact” comes in.

Impact

To avoid the kind of historical blindness of which the field of VR is often guilty, let us consider the larger context and history of activist media. Specifically, scholarship has highlighted a long and rich history of documentary film being used to complement existing activist movement and grassroots community action. In the report they produced for the Documentary Organization of Canada, Maria De Rosa and Marilyn Burgess point to the *Challenge for Change* program as a pivotal moment in making video technology a viable tool for fostering social transformation in Canada, identifying the initiative as “directly connected to the creation of community-based video art movements.”¹⁵ Elsewhere, the historical link between media and activist movements is made evident in the various ways this relationship has been named, from Tom Waugh’s “committed documentary,” to what Chattoo calls films using a “coalition-based approach,” by way of Jessica Clark and Barbara Abrash’s “social justice documentary” and Elizabeth Miller’s notion of “outreach partnerships.”¹⁶ Meanwhile, borrowing from Beth Karlin and John Johnson’s description of “film-based social action campaigns” and Patricia Finneran’s report on “documentary impact,” Kate Nash and John Corner come to the conclusion that in such initiatives, “the documentary text is re-imagined as just one element (albeit

15 M. De Rosa, M. Burgess, *Charting a Course for Impact Producing in Canada: Trends, Best Practices and Future Directions* (Toronto: The Documentary Organization of Canada, 2016), 13.

16 T. Waugh, *Show Us Life: Toward a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary* (Metuchen, NJ - London: The Scarecrow Press, 1984); C.B. Chattoo, *Story Movements: How Documentaries Empower People and Inspire Social Change*: 3; J. Clark, B. Abrash, “Social Justice Documentary: Designing for Impact,” *Center for Media and Social Impact* (2011), <http://www.cmsimpact.org/tags/impact/designing-impact>; E. Miller, “Building Participation in the Outreach for the Documentary *The Water Front*,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 43, no. 1 (2009), 59-86, 75, <https://doi.org/10.3138/jcs.43.1.59>. See also D. Whiteman, “Out of the Theatres and into the Streets: A Coalition Model of the Political Impact of Documentary Film and Video,” *Political Communication* 21, no. 1 (2004), 56-69, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584600490273263-1585>.

a central one) in a strategic communication project.”¹⁷ In other words, a key conceit of this relationship is that the film – or other non-fiction piece of media – should be designed in such a way as to serve “as a catalyst for change and dialogue”¹⁸ by existing activist networks.

Two important considerations emerge from these definitions. First is the idea that, “social impact is something that the project team works to produce, through the processes of strategic communication, rather than something that just happens (or not) when audiences encounter a documentary film.”¹⁹ Secondly, rather than considering the documentary film as an end in itself, the notion of impact asks that creators consider the concrete and measurable outcomes their projects may have on an individual, community, or societal level. Although they differ on specifics, various definitions of impact in the field of activist media agree on the range of possible impacts different projects might strive for: from simply raising awareness to influencing policy makers and changing laws.²⁰ Of course, there are major differences between producing a documentary film and creating demonstrable and measurable impact. Hence the rise of specialists – indeed an entire industry – focused on producing impact. This is where impact “campaigns” and the work of “impact producers” come into play.

According to De Rosa and Burgess, “[t]he term ‘impact producing’ describes a new space in documentary filmmaking that combines distribution, community outreach and audience engagement into a formalized coordinated

17 B. Karlin, J. Johnson, “Measuring Impact: The Importance of Evaluation for Documentary Film Campaigns,” *M/C Journal* 14, no. 6 (2011), <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/viewArticle/444>; P. Finneran, *Documentary Impact: Social Change Through Storytelling*, (Toronto: StoryMatters and HotDocs), http://www.inspiritfoundation.org/files/5114/0932/8738/Hot_Docs_2014_Documentary_Impact_Report.pdf; K. Nash, J. Corner, “Strategic Impact Documentary: Contexts of Production and Social Intervention,” 231.

18 E. Miller, “Building Participation in the Outreach for the Documentary *The Water Front*,” 75.

19 K. Nash, J. Corner, “Strategic Impact Documentary: Contexts of Production and Social Intervention,” 230. Emphasis added.

20 See E. Verellen, “From Distribution to Audience Engagement: Change through Film,” *The Fledgling Fund* (2010), <http://www.thefledglingfund.org/resources/distribution-to-audience-engagement>; M. De Rosa, M. Burgess, *Charting a Course for Impact Producing in Canada: Trends, Best Practices and Future Directions*; BRITDOC, *Impact Field Guide and Toolkit* (2015), <http://impactguide.org>.

‘impact campaign.’”²¹ Further, their report also defines impact producing as “a new space in documentary filmmaking that leverages marketing and distribution strategies to engage audiences and create social change.”²² Finally, De Rosa and Burgess borrow from Tanya Notley and Sam Gregory to describe the practice as “a hybrid of activism, movement building, community organising, grass roots event management, marketing and distribution.”²³

This constellation of practices is summarized in OTMYW impact producer Michaela Ternasky-Holland’s framing of impact campaigns as a “*mobilization strategy*,” rather than as a mere distribution strategy.²⁴ As the press materials for the project also explain:

On the Morning You Wake (to the End of the World) is at the center of a long-term impact campaign that aims to inspire people around the world to take action to shape the future of nuclear weapons policy, and provides a number of pathways for people to get involved and work together toward the abolition of nuclear weapons. [...] The experience invites audiences to reflect on how the presence of nuclear weapons impacts their concepts of home, safety, and security. From completing the experience, the audience will be provided with *tangible steps to take in nuclear disarmament*.²⁵

In consulting existing resources on best practices in impact production, several elements come to the fore which can be of use for those interested in using VR for this purpose. Among these is the importance of using documentary storytelling to generate powerful emotions, and the need for impact producers to channel these to the appropriate avenues. This is visible when Emily Verellen frames the notion of “audience engagement” in terms of,

21 M. De Rosa, M. Burgess, *Charting a Course for Impact Producing in Canada: Trends, Best Practices and Future Directions*: 6.

22 Ibid.: 9.

23 Ibid. See also T. Notley, S. Gregory, *Video for Change: Creating and Measuring Social Impact: A Working Paper by the Video 4 Change Network* (June 2015), https://video4change.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/video4change-impact-working-paper-2015_final.pdf

24 J. Plass et al., *Deepening Engagement and Learning Impact Through Virtual Reality Activations*.

25 The a copy of the source document has been made accessible here: https://bit.ly/OTMYW_PRESS. Emphasis added.

“moving a film’s audience from passive viewing to active involvement with the issue represented. It is what happens after audiences see the film and want to use their energy, resources, ideas, connections, or time to make a difference.”²⁶ More important still is Verellen’s insistence on the fleeting and precious nature of the emotions these experiences can foster in audiences:

when a film ends and audience emotions are tangible, the film-making team, with the support of its partners, has a real opportunity to move the audience from passive to active. That small but critical window of opportunity—high emotions, a captive audience, a pressing social issue and collaborative partners—are the right ingredients for inspiring audiences to begin or strengthen their engagement with the social issue.²⁷

Nash and Corner make a similar argument when they write that “the emotion generated by viewing the film alongside others needs to be harnessed and converted into forms of immediate action, something that audiences can do ‘in the moment.’”²⁸ The authors lay bare the responsibility impact producers face in this key juncture:

In this window of opportunity, the filmmakers and their outreach partners need to be able to provide audiences with immediate actions that will address their fundamental question – “what can I do?” In answering this question, impact producers and partners seek to generate various “asks,” specific actions that audience members can take that support the social change campaign.²⁹

As this statement makes clear, one of the ways impact campaigns can move from audience engagement to involvement is by designing different calls to action. From clicking a link for more information on a given topic to participating in demonstrations, the range of possible actions will

26 E. Verellen, “From Distribution to Audience Engagement: Change through Film:” 9.

27 Ibid.: 7.

28 K. Nash, J. Corner, “Strategic Impact Documentary: Contexts of Production and Social Intervention:” 236.

29 Ibid.

differ according to the context in which a film is screened, as well as to who the intended audience is.

In *OTMYW*, for example, before the credits roll after the third and final chapter of the 38-minute VR experience, an end slate invites users to “join the movement” by visiting the project’s website, where they can find resources on a variety of topics, to use if they so choose (Fig. 5).³⁰ While the friction caused by needing to take off the VR headset to navigate to a website should not be discounted, *OTMYW* serves as a good example of the kind of “asks” an impact-focused project should consider. For example, in order to meet its audience members where they are on their journey to action, the statements it presents offer different levels of engagement: from being ready to learn more about the issue, to supporting organizations working on solutions, to joining existing activist movements. More meaningful still – in the context of the transformational power of VR – are the following statements:

I recognize that:

I have the power to create change

I can ban the presence of nuclear weapons in my neighborhood

I don't have to do this on my own (Emphasis added)

In calling attention to the presence of existing networks, *OTMYW* avoids some of the oft-repeated criticism directed at VR, namely its solitary, self-centred – perhaps even solipsistic – nature. In other words, the barrier to positive social change is lowered when the user is given the necessary tools to take the energy generated by a project and channel it toward meaningful change. Even if participants are not yet ready to act, the website gives them an

30 <https://www.onthemorningyouwake.com/#get-involved>

outlet to express their emotions and to find solace in the fact that they are not alone (Fig. 6).

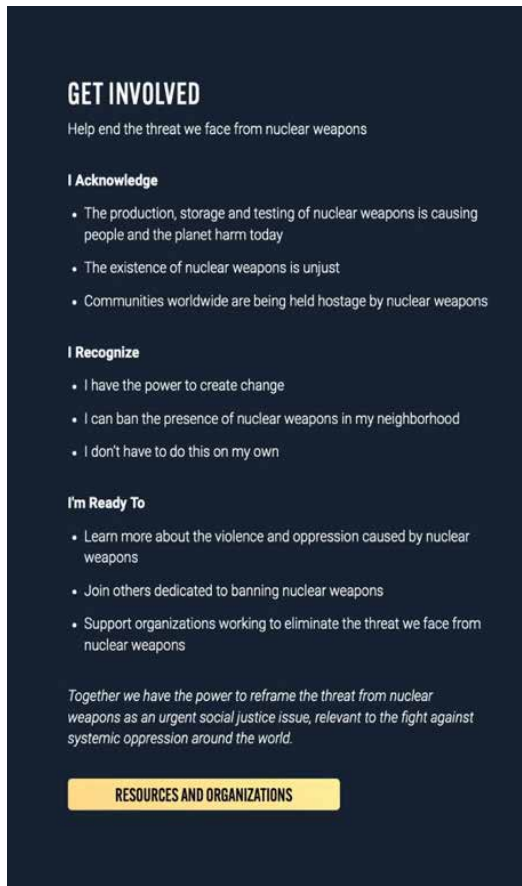


Fig. 5 - Screenshot from the project website for *On the Morning You Wake (to the End of the World)*, inviting viewers to get involved after going through the experience.

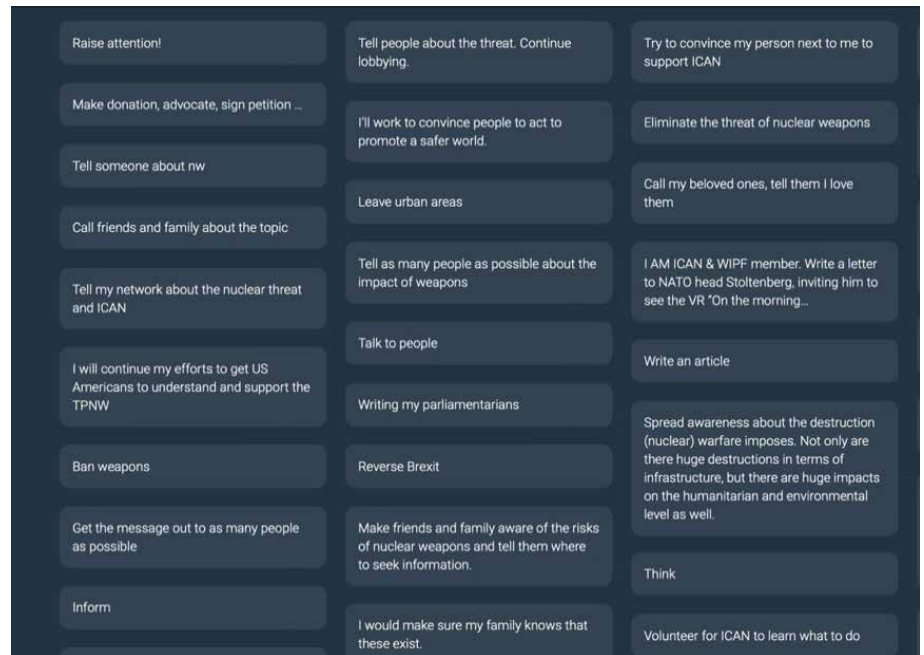


Fig. 6 – Screenshot from the *OTMYW* website, where participants are invited to share how they would use their last 38 minutes on Earth.

Each piece of activist media should be directed at a particular audience according to the impact it hopes to achieve. Moreover, each audience requires different approaches and asks. For instance, the various field guides published on the topic make it clear that a film screened for a group of parents or students will likely not ask them the same level of involvement as might be needed of a group of policy-makers. Nor will the same materials be presented to both audiences, for that matter. Indeed, the fact that different audiences require different asks is an important lesson socially minded VR can take away from impact producing. Perhaps more important still is the idea that not everyone needs to see a given project for impact to happen. What is vital is having the *right* people see it. As De Rosa and Burgess put it, “[w]hereas the film industry

typically measures audience reach and sales, impact measurement examines the extent to which the right audiences are reached in strategic ways to promote social change.”³¹ Toni Bell echoes this distinction, noting that, “when we think about audiences and distribution, the goal is to get as many people as possible to see the film. When an ‘impact’ approach is used, one tries to be strategic about who should see the film to bring about a given change.”³² Finally, Friesen puts it most emphatically when she says: “Reach is not engagement, and engagement is not impact. [...] to claim you’ve made an impact, *those actions need to result in measurable change*.”³³

While a film might serve as the inception or catalyst for change, it is important to remember that the work of transforming oneself, one’s community, or society at large must be done outside the film itself. Moreover, against overarching claims about the transformational potential of VR, the notion of impact asks that we reconsider whom might a given project be designed for. It also asks that we acknowledge that simply having made a VR experience is not enough if the right people don’t get to see it. In other words, it puts into question the appropriateness of publishing such a project on a commercial storefront such as the Meta Quest store. Considering the potential negative effects that VR holds, the idea of letting audiences up to their own devices to deal with challenging topics in the comfort of their own home becomes more absurd. Hence why VR seems best suited for use in larger impact campaigns.

This is precisely what the teams behind *OTMYW* did. In addition to being published for free on the Meta Quest storefront, the project was brought to classrooms and university campuses, to public spaces and to forums on nuclear

31 M. De Rosa, M. Burgess, *Charting a Course for Impact Producing in Canada: Trends, Best Practices and Future Direction*: 7.

32 T. Bell, quoted in P.J. Poirier, “For Docs Promoting Social Change, Impact Strategies are Essential,” *Now & Next* (February 10, 2020), <https://cmf-fmc.ca/now-next/articles/documentaries-social-change-impact-strategy/>.

33 T. Friesen, *Story Money Impact: Funding Media for Social Change*. (New York: Routledge, 2016), 152. Emphasis added.

disarmament.³⁴ It was also shown as part of dedicated exhibits at the Nobel Peace Center in Oslo and at the Museum of the Moving Image (MOMI), in Queens, New York.

Although the three-chapter VR experience remains the central part of the exhibit, MOMI visitors were treated to a whole slew of bonus material that framed the immersive experience (Fig. 7). Behind-the-scenes footage, written materials and additional unpublished interviews could be accessed before putting on the VR headset. This onboarding phase can be seen as preparing most users for their upcoming experience, but there is also the possibility that some visitors – perhaps people who stumbled into the exhibit from elsewhere in the MOMI – could reasonably stop after only ingesting this ancillary material. Once visitors were ready to view the project, they were greeted with the aforementioned introductory survey, used to gauge audience’s interest and readiness before going in. The VR experience itself was identical to the version published online, the only exception being that visitors were not necessarily alone. While the experience of being in a VR headset remains a solitary one, other audience members are present, as are the docents that help participants into and out of the experience.



Fig. 7 - OTMYW Exhibit at the Museum of the Moving Image. Credit: Thanassi Karageorgiou

Likely the most important component of the OTMYW exhibit at MOMI was the so-called “aftercare survey,”

34 A full list can be found in J. Plass et al., *Deepening Engagement and Learning Impact Through Virtual Reality Activations*.

which visitors were invited to fill out on a set of tablets next to the VR viewing stations. These surveys play two key roles related to impact. On a superficial level, they aim to measure the impact of the VR experience by gauging audience reactions to the piece. This serves to document audience engagement and demonstrate the project's own impact (as reported in Plass et al.35); an ever-growing necessity when seeking funds for documentary projects. The second and most important role of these aftercare surveys is in orienting participants toward the right resources for them at that moment. If they responded that they were looking for more information, or for existing groups with which they might get involved, the survey might offer different tools (Fig. 8). The same can be said of whether they answered being interested in the feminist, postcolonial, environmental, or artistic aspects of the issue (Fig. 9).

8 → Which statement resonates with you the most?*

Choose as many as you like

- ☐ A I am ready to support organizations working to eliminate the threat we face from nuclear weapon
- ☐ B I am ready to learn more about the violence and oppression caused by nuclear weapons
- ☐ C I am ready to join others dedicated to banning nuclear weapons
- ☐ D Other

[Continue ✓](#)

9 → What are you interested in learning more about?

- ☐ A Direct Action
- ☐ B Humanitarian/Environmental Impacts
- ☐ C Feminist Approach
- ☐ D Queer Approach
- ☐ E History of Nuclear Weapons
- ☐ F Nuclear Weapons and International Law
- ☐ G Current status of Nuclear Weapons
- ☐ H Racial Justice
- ☐ I Nuclear Policy & Diplomacy
- ☐ J Education
- ☐ K Science & Nuclear Weapons
- ☐ L Art & Nuclear Weapons
- ☐ M Other

Fig. 8-9 – Screenshots of the “after-care survey” visitors of the *OTMYW* exhibit at MOMI could fill out. The survey is also available on the project’s website.

In an interview with the author, *OTMYW* impact producer Michaela Ternasky-Holland makes explicit the role of these surveys, specifically as tools for channelling the energy created during a VR experience:

35 Ibid.

There were ways we let audience members release some of the energy pent up from what they were exposed to and that feeling of “What can I do right now? How can I use that energy.” We call it a decompression moment. Very often in mainstream media we see these images that make us feel a certain way (this is terrible, amazing, awful, incredible, etc.), but we don’t have anywhere to put that energy. So, we just absorb the energy and we become a little callused to it. And since VR is a newer technology, that feeling can be heightened even more.

Because VR’s appeal as a tool for social change does not seem to be depreciating, it is becoming more apparent as time goes on that the industry still has much to learn from the field of impact producing. A project like *OTMYW* did many things right, many of which are documented in the case study published by XR for Change. With that said, there is still plenty that can go wrong when a project such as *OTMYW* is not presented in the context of a carefully designed exhibit purpose built for impact.

Being Alone, Together

By way of conclusion, I wish to discuss another exhibit in which *OTMYW* was presented. Throughout 2023, the *transformé* experience was presented at OASIS immersion, an immersive projection venue in Montreal. The show featured eight experiences previously created for VR headsets which were converted into large scale projections onto the walls of the exhibition space, making it a communal experience. *OTMYW* was one of two projects screened in the first room of the exhibit.³⁶ Reworked for the format, *OTMYW* was also heavily edited, both in terms of length and so as to be suitable for a larger audience. For example, the portion with the Hiroshima survivor revealing the horrors she witnessed was cut. Perhaps it was deemed unsuitable for the children under thirteen whom health and safety regulation typically bar from using VR headsets. Meanwhile,

36 The other being a piece on grief titled *Vestige* (Aaron Bradbury, 2018).

other heart-wrenching moments were left intact. To this day, I shudder at the memory of hearing a woman imagine what her shadow would look like after being incinerated by the nuclear blast.



Fig. 10 – Picture of OTMYW as part of the *transformé* exhibit at OASIS Immersion. Credit: Philippe Bédard.



Fig. 11 – Picture of the infamous alert at the inception of OTMYW, as seen in the *transformé* exhibit. Credit: Philippe Bédard.

Several problems emerge from the way the project was presented, however. For one, the new format means elements of décor and other exhibit visitors are interposed between my body and the projected shadows (Fig. 10), thereby lessening the impact created when the VR

experience pushed me to see it as *my* shadow. The same criticism also applies to other visual elements, such as the crucial alert which serves as the project's inciting incident, and which can also easily be occluded (Fig. 11). Of course, the impact of empathizing with what the characters say remains. However, this speaks to the power of storytelling alone and not to anything the immersive exhibit did better – or differently – than its VR counterpart. The same conclusion applies to the emotional impact of Dr. Jamaica Heolimeleikalani Osorio's poetry, which remains a dominant fixture of the project in this incarnation as well. In other words, it is not the immersive or interactive nature of VR or this new format that is the main source of the project's emotional valence. Words and music play a much greater role in fact.

Secondly, there is also the fact that, despite a starting time being indicated on the entry ticket, audiences are allowed to enter as they arrive, regardless of whether the projection has started already. This means on more than one occasion upon visiting the exhibit, I entered after the story had started. While I was familiar with the narrative and context, other visitors could have entered just before, during or after some of the project's most crucial story beats.³⁷ This speaks to a larger issue with the exhibit, namely a shift in focus from the project's original design as a component in a larger impact campaign to a mere piece of entertainment. This is evident in the way *transformé* was publicized. For instance, in one of the placards guests could read before going into the show, one could read:

OASIS Immersion offers an exhibition that thrusts us into the heart of the human experience by addressing contemporary issues. These creative adaptations, inspired by real-life events, *bring to light the strength of courage and the possibilities of freedom that can emerge from our personal trials and tribulations*. After all, sharing each other's experiences has always opened our perspectives by creating

37 The same realization also stands for *Vestige*, since users can enter at an inopportune time and either be sideswiped by the heart-wrenching monologue or left wondering what the project is about, should they have entered too late.

connections between realities and emotions, in an increasingly complex world. (Emphasis added).

Further in the text, the creators of the exhibit express, “a desire to share a message, an inspiration and a humanistic vision that will allow us to emerge transformed.” Rather than trying to equip audiences with knowledge or moving them to act on a key issue such as denuclearization, *transformé* seems content with a saccharine and superficial inspirational message. In so doing, it embodies Nakamura’s description of VR pieces intended to make users “feel good about feeling bad.”³⁸ So much is also made clear in the fact that the question of “what can I do?” – key component of impact production – is left unanswered in this incarnation of the project. Instead of capitalizing on the “window of opportunity” so many impact campaigns hope for, the end of the *OTMYW* screening in this exhibit only signals that audience members are encouraged to move on in their journey through the venue, at which point they will be exposed to other stories with different messages. Whatever impact might have been produced by *OTMYW* – or any other piece in the show – is potentially neutralized after walking around for eighty minutes and seeing seven other projects that each have different goals and potentially different target audiences. Finally, in lieu of aftercare materials that might guide users toward the right form of action for them to take at that moment, *transformé* simply included a piece of wall art symbolizing empathy and inviting users to connect words related to the concept: “I am you,” “sense of unity,” “human connection,” etc.

38 L. Nakamura, “Feeling Good About Feeling Bad: Virtuous Virtual Reality and the Automation of Racial Empathy.”

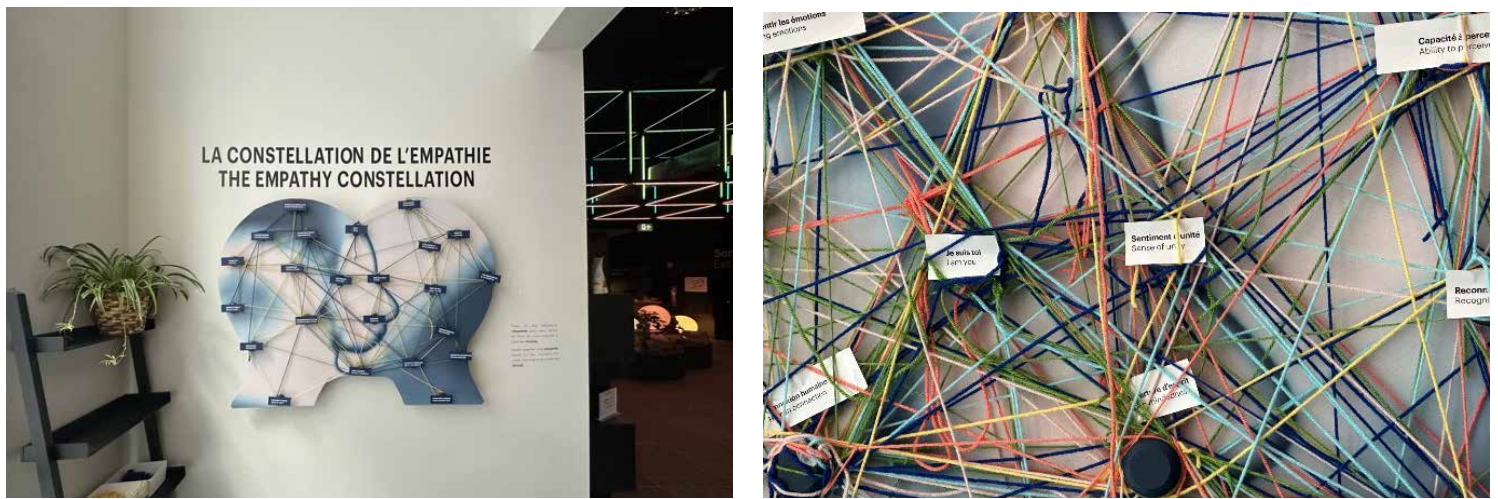


Fig. 12-13 – After exiting the transformé experience, visitors have a chance of encountering this structure which invites them to think about what “empathy” means. Credit: Philippe Bédard.

Although I have focused here on some of the shortcomings of this version of *OTMYW* in comparison to the singular VR version or the larger and more focused impact campaign at MOMI, there are elements I wish to highlight that we can yet learn from. Specifically, when compared to the solitary experience VR offers, this immersive exhibit format is communal by nature. This was in fact one of the aims of the project, as expressed in one of the introductory placards which contrasts the “individual and nested experience” of VR with the collective experience of this format. Indeed, just as I remember the chilling sensation evoked by some of *OTMYW*’s more gut-wrenching moments, I also recall being able to turn to friends or loved ones in the room with me and sharing a compassionate look or reassuring gesture.

Another, perhaps more crucial lesson we can learn from *transformé* is its use of a designated physical venue instead of headsets owned by individuals in their own homes. At the time of writing, VR still faces major issues with distribution. The problem is exacerbated by the relative sparsity of VR headsets when compared to other types of viewing platforms. Are the ecological costs of constructing millions of headsets for individual users to buy really worth the emotional impact that some VR experiences can produce? The question is particularly important when venues exist that can more adequately equip users for their experience, not only in terms of the necessary VR

hardware, but also in terms of the emotional and pedagogical resources that might be necessary to make the most out of an impact-driven experience. Although VR is a very powerful tool, it is also one that is seldom used effectively. To put it differently, it is a tool best used by professionals in specific contexts. These include the laboratory settings which have generated so many proofs as to VR's transformational potential. More importantly, these also include impact campaigns specifically designed to make the most of VR: for the right people, in the right conditions, and for the appropriate results.

In either case, the presence of other human beings – scientists, artists, activists, other audience members – merits further attention. If VR might help people grow on a personal level by going through simulated experiences and hearing characters tell their story, larger change on community or societal levels requires cooperation with other individuals and with existing activist organizations. Transformation of this kind can only happen when you are not alone.

AN-ICONOLOGY

History, Theory, and Practices of Environmental Images



UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO
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