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The future of the screen: Exploring Venice Immersive with Liz Rosenthal and Michel Reilhac



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Abstract

Within the Venice Film Festival, a dedicated section for immersive works was introduced in 2016, quickly gaining competitive status alongside traditional cinematic works. Venice Immersive serves as both an exhibition and promotion venue for XR and a forum for discussing pivotal market issues. This interview with the Venice Immersive creators and curators, Liz Rosenthal and Michel Reilhac, delves into the early stages of the section, its objectives, the challenges faced, and the major issues within the immersive works market.

Keywords

Venice Film Festival, XR, virtual reality, immersive market

In 2016, Venice International Film Festival introduced an immersive section, which developed into a core Virtual Reality (VR) competition the following year. The Venice Immersive section has now expanded to cover all forms of Extended Reality (XR), including Mixed Reality (MR), Augmented Reality (AR), and large-scale projection. The selected works are exhibited on the Lazzaretto Vecchio Island and compete for three Lion Prizes, promoting the development of taste hierarchies in immersive arts thanks to the cultural capital inherited from the reference institution, the A-list festival.

Venice Immersive has become a cultural and artistic landmark in the new geography of immersive festivals, which partly pander to the tradition of film festivals and partly depart from it by elaborating new centres and new peripheries. Venice Immersive is one of those centres, and is now the richest and best-known; therefore, it acts as both a promotional

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showcase and a gathering venue for the international XR community. I discussed these topics with Liz Rosenthal and Michel Reilhac, pioneers of immersive arts, who have been curating the festival's XR section since the beginning.

Anja Boato: Did you have a model or reference in mind when you started working on the Venice Immersive program?

Michel Reilhac: I would not say we had references, but we did have goals. The first was to do everything as if we were going to be part of an international A-list film festival. We wanted the VR section to be treated on the same level as cinema. The priority was to signal that VR was a new art form, just as cinema is. So, negotiating with the Biennale to award Lions to three winners was extremely important. We wanted the VR artists to have a red carpet moment, for the prizes to be presented during the main ceremony, and for everything to be handled identically on the same stage. All these details were crucial. Second, because it was the Venice Biennale, we had a standard to aspire for. We wanted it to become a reference point, the biggest and best show. For that, the best technical quality in presenting the works was essential. At the time, no one had created similar events as well as we had. It quickly grew and became the largest event of its kind.

Liz Rosenthal: The Biennale was amazing in understanding the needs of engaging the audience in a totally new type of exhibition, so we could create the best space and environment for a new medium. Michel and I had been to festivals in which VR works were being presented in loud, unsettling places which did not feel comfortable or enticing for audiences and for showcasing these new mediums in the best environment. The first time you enter a virtual environment, it is quite a shock to the mind and body because your limbic brain is suddenly transported into another place. The way we were introduced to exhibitions or the way we watched things was treated almost like a tech demo. This happens frequently when using new formats and new technologies; they are often labelled and placed in the tech space rather than the creative, art, and audience-focused space. Art forms have rituals. When you go to the theatre or the cinema, there is a ritual about how you enter a space, the idea of having a quiet and comfortable environment. In VR, embodied spaces can provoke mind and body reactions. We wanted to create an exhibition space where we could really celebrate the incredible excellence expressed through amazing artistic innovations, and to help create high standards for the audience experience.

Boato: Venice Immersive is not a stand-alone festival, but rather a component in the larger machine that is the Biennale. What does this imply from an organisational and curatorial standpoint?

Reilhac: One of the amazing things about the Biennale is that we have no pressure, no political pressure, and no obligations towards sponsors or anyone. We have never had a phone call, a letter, or even a remark. So, there is considerable respect for that creative freedom, and the Biennale has been supportive from the very first moment. I recall when they began recommending locations for creating a proper VR section back in 2017. The President called us and said, 'I want to show you something, you have to come and join me on the Lazzaretto Vecchio Island.' When we got there, everything was in ruins; there were holes in the roofs and plants growing everywhere. I can still remember Baratta[1] standing in the centre with about a dozen people surrounding him. Then he turned to us and said, 'Okay, this is what I am thinking for Venice VR. What are you going to need to make it work?' We described everything we needed, and several things that needed to be done. Then he turned to his colleagues and said, 'Okay, you've heard what they need; now make it happen.' It was July 10th, and it had to be ready by September 1st. We felt it was unthinkable that this would ever happen, but they succeeded. I have a lot of respect for the technical team and builders of the Biennale for their accomplishments under difficult circumstances.

Rosenthal: Yes, Alberto[2] has been really excited about this medium since it was presented to him. It has been amazing that he has been so open and so inspirational in letting this exhibition grow. Immersive brings together so many creative sectors and so many disciplines: performing arts, design, gaming, visual arts, and sound design. However, it is a screen-based medium. There is always some form of screen, whether in a headset or outside. So, it is incredible that the film festival has taken this on board and included it in their program because it is about the future of the screen in some ways. It is even more special because the Biennale is a multi-arts organisation with that vision. And it is incredibly supportive in terms of curation.

Boato: So, let us talk about curation. What are the main criteria for evaluating and selecting immersive artworks?

Rosenthal: Venice Immersive has both a competition and a 'best of' section. Coming to the competition, anyone can submit freely as long as it is a premiere. We hold the selection process in June, which requires three weeks of nonstop viewing. We are looking across all the different formats. Even within VR, there are many different forms of experiences. Some projects have no agency other than moving your head. Then there are single-person or multi-person experiences, and they can be haptic, or a hybrid between haptic and virtual experiences, or multi-player experiences with complicated sets and actors. VR has so many distinct genres. We also include projects from game studios that are narrative and social VR worlds which include many hours of gameplay, but also projects that are shorter forms of experimental art. So, we are examining the many forms and types of emerging genres right

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now. Venice Immersive represents all of what we feel, from our curatorial point of view, to be the best examples within those forms and genres. Moreover, sourcing works and stories from across different cultures and countries is important to us. Consequently, our curation has multiple layers.

Reilhac: In fact, we consider the overall quality involving the story itself, the theme, the narrative, the interactivity, the user experience, the art direction, and these components, so that the experience becomes relevant to a viewer. It can be on a very rational, almost analytical level, or completely irrational and fantastic. Then, we also consider the goal of trying to attain equal numbers of women and men among directors and producers. Of course, our interpretation and perception of works have evolved over time because we have a greater understanding of where those works originate and how they are made and realised. I think we understand the innovative dimension, particularly related to technology. We can appreciate more how artists, in some cases, just use technology completely differently than the way they are supposed to.

Boato: What about the 'best of' section?

Rosenthal: We view projects hosted in venues and other festivals or search for projects online that have launched since the last edition of Venice Immersive. The most exciting part is meeting and discovering new talents. Then, if there are any works that we have not seen and want to watch, we request to view the project.

Reilhac: It is only Liz and myself who welcome works based on what we have seen or heard about over the year, which we believe reflect some of the major advances, or are wonderfully written pieces. Many factors are considered, including genres, production countries, and lengths.

Boato: Venice Immersive showcases a wide range of experiences and works. Among them, a section is dedicated to Virtual Worlds, which are virtual venues built on the VRChat platform. That appears to be something unique to Venice Immersive.

Reilhac: Well, other events, such as Raindance,^[3] also have World Galleries, but I know that many festivals are starting to explore the concept now, based on what we do. I believe this is primarily due to COVID. When COVID happened and we were stranded at home, Liz and I discovered VRChat. We heard about VRChat and had been on it a few times but had never explored it seriously, especially with world builders. So, it was amazing to us that these worlds were being built by a real community of people who did not consider themselves artists, even though most of these worlds were really sophisticated, beautiful, and rich. It is a new frontier in VR for us in terms of making a project happen. I believe the trigger point

was also our friendship with Mike Salmon.[4] In 2019, he produced *Eleven Eleven*, selected in the Venice VR competition. So we met him through this, and he started informing us about the world and its significance, as well as offering to drive us there and show us around. We were so excited by how diverse, engaging, and creatively different the worlds were. I believe that the world-building community is the future of VR, also because it is built on a social platform, and the experience is shared with other people. The social dimension adds value to the entire experience and all its components and is completely indigenous to the platform.

Boato: How can one evaluate a social experience from an artistic perspective? In Virtual Worlds, relationships play a significant role in defining the experience.

Rosenthal: The social aspect is key. With VRChat and the World-Building Community, a whole new form of experiential art and entertainment has emerged, where these worlds have been created to be experienced with other people. Even though you can visit them alone, they have been designed to be experienced together with others. Within VRChat, world-hopping is a popular activity where you gather with your community or friends, where the journey itself and the social aspect of travelling together with others is what makes this an exciting and pleasurable way to experience these rich environments. The fact that there are so many different environments of all types of genres, scale, and length makes this an interesting topic. World-builders are also experimenting with how they can incorporate narrative experience into these environments. Fins' *Magic Heist*[5] world is a great example. The setting is a cross between a fantasy narrative and a fantastical Disney theme park. Fins plays with sections where you are forced to go through without interacting which are 'on rails', and parts where you are playing or travelling through with other people and have free agency. So, a wide range of activities can happen in that world. Some of them are about exploring the environment with others and also meeting non-player characters that drive the story forward. VRChat as a platform is an enabling tool for artists to iterate and experiment, as it provides an ever-evolving set of tools for the community to build these experiences.

Boato: Do you think that the kind of experiences that you can find in Venice set some standards for the community?

Rosenthal: Yes, I think so. Michel and I are quite ambitious. Everything about the way the event is run, including the staff and the way everyone works together, is critical as a benchmark of an excellent exhibition. However, it is the same with the works selected and showcased. Venice is an A-list festival, and we are the only one in the world that includes this type of competition in its program. The fact that the pieces win Lions and are recognised on the same level as films shows that they are not a sidebar, a tech demo, or a marketplace. That

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means we are attracting really high-level projects, and I believe people are longing to come to Venice now; artists are waiting to compete in Venice Immersive. I believe we are receiving numerous submissions now, and people are watching it as a place for premiering their work. That is how films work. Being chosen by a prestigious festival such as Venice or Cannes launches a career, and we would like to see it happen for immersive art. At the moment, I think Venice is pretty unique in that way.

Reilhac: This is why we have an increasing number of visitors each year. I believe this is because they know they can find world premieres of works. We are lucky that we get some of the most highly anticipated pieces. So, there is undoubtedly an effect, similar to a snowball effect. You must trigger people's interest with the quality of your presentation – not just the quality of the projects, but also the quality of how you show them. Then it spreads through the artist, the producers, and the people who come to simply see it. I have seen how this snowball can take up to three years to form, but what is interesting is that once the snowball is in motion, rolling down a hill and becoming bigger and bigger, it happens without your intervention. It is almost as if you do not have to do anything. So, there is obviously recognition among the audience, both in the sector and in general. A positive consensus triggers people more. I think the success comes from that phenomenon as well.

Boato: One of the many changes to the Venice Immersive programming through the years was an important shift in the range of XR technologies at the festival. The number of 360° movies has decreased in favour of a richer representation of 6DoF works. [6] MR experiences have attracted noteworthy attention too. Is this a deliberate curatorial decision on your part, or are you influenced by the industry and the movement inside the VR community?

Rosenthal: The range of projects develops because of the advancement of new tools, whether they be software or hardware, enabling different forms to be created or making them more affordable and accessible. For example, consider motion capture or volumetric capture technology – you can now create them on your phone. How can artists take something as simple as a low-resolution capture mechanism and turn it into something incredibly sophisticated and aesthetically pleasing? People are learning, and they begin with these tools, as typical for artists, who choose unexpected objects and transform them into something else. However, it can take some time for people to create compelling storytelling, converting these tools into a new language as well. We have seen it with the kind of projects in which the storytelling and world-building are of high quality, and where the artist's understanding of the medium allows increasingly sophisticated use of spatial awareness. In other words, hardware, software, and technology are instruments for artistic expression. Thus, when a new tool becomes accessible, the more curious artists will use it and begin

experimenting to see what they might produce. Of course, it is also a deliberate choice on our side.

Boato: The pieces that are competing at Venice Immersive differ greatly in several ways. There are variations in both technology and the kind of interaction between the user and the environment. Furthermore, the approach to the content differs; some experiences focus more on gaming elements, while others strive for a deeper narrative immersion. Still, they compete for the same prizes and occupy the same physical area. Have you ever given this some thought while you were programming?

Reilhac: Initially, we had basically two different sections for two of the main awards, one for interactive works and the other for storytelling experiences. We found that it did not work, as most pieces have some interactivity, and user experience is important as long as you want the spectator to be more than just a passive viewer. So, we decided there was no real point in creating genres, and it was probably too early to do so anyhow. Hence, we believe it is far more appropriate to present three awards unrelated to the themes of the works. I think that in the end, you evaluate the same effects that the work has on you – emotional triggers, intellectual stimulation, or a more rational response. However, what they all have in common is that they provide an experience in which you focus on the outcome, on the magic of the feeling generated by a good story, rather than on the technology or the way it is made. So, there are tricks and things to know if you want to write or design an interactive project. However, the lack of a bible, reference books, or other resources makes it a bit of a tunnel where you just keep trying new things. This is true both when you create a piece and when you evaluate it.

Boato: Do you consider Venice Immersive to be a pivotal event for creating an XR community?

Rosenthal: Yes, absolutely. I believe that contacts and networking in Venice are essential. A huge WhatsApp group has been established during the festival, and it is not the only one. Through these groups, people stay in touch. However, coming to the island is even more important. When people are in the Lazzaretto Vecchio Garden, partnerships and communities are constantly born. Of course, there is the market, where we are introducing decision-makers to new projects and artists. Afterwards, the vast selection of projects brings all the makers and the audience together. I believe that the festival has evolved into the most amazing gathering place because we are all on an island, have beautiful gardens, and can easily meet each other. As Michel mentioned, many things began there because of the Venice Immersive premiere status, the beauty of the exhibition, and its size. People genuinely want to visit Venice for networking and meetings.

Boato: What is the difference in this community-building process compared to other similar global events?

Reilhac: Venice Immersive has developed into the largest event, and I say this because of the number of pieces showcased. We currently have 30 works in competition, 10 in the Best of section, between 3 and 6 in the college area, and 30 VRChat worlds. For example, Tribeca[7] featured 13 pieces this year, and I believe South by Southwest[8] had just a few more. Both are extremely important immersive festivals. That happens when you present 70 works, which implies that we are bringing in 70 teams, and those teams already become a *de facto* community, similar to an artist community, when you show world premieres never shown before. So, the quantity attracts a large crowd who, in turn, become magnets for the reasons I mentioned earlier. World premieres draw the greatest number of visitors and encourage the creation of communities, and the two taken together are a very strong reason for people to participate. Many of them stated that they attend only the Venice Immersive Festival, due to the high costs, because they believe the money they have to invest to travel to Venice is well spent. It has the same snowball effect as before, with everyone saying, 'Well, see you in Venice, of course.' Thus, the number of visitors increases due to word-of-mouth. The market is on the island as it is now a component of what we do, and as a result, it has also included everyone in the community who comes to work – whether in co-production, funding, investment, or distribution.

Boato: Do you believe the festival has or can play a role in fostering the development of an immersive reality market?

Rosenthal: When you say market, what do you mean?

Boato: A way to monetise the production of immersive reality works.

Rosenthal: This is the big key point for everybody. When you do not make an impact or show a financial return, investors quit making investments. That is where we are at this point. We conducted a closed think tank in Venice on this topic, and I believe the whole community needs to be involved in finding a solution. Michel and I play a role in this dynamic because Venice Immersive is such an important gathering place. Because there are so many people in Venice, we think it is crucial to interact meaningfully there. This is a fantastic chance. It would be wonderful to have more opportunities to meet and discuss these topics further, but those are not the goals of the film festival, nor is it necessarily our responsibility. Perhaps it is something that needs to be outside festivals, but we believe that when everyone is on the island, these kinds of conversations and debates are really important. We feel responsible for the selected projects. A lot is still to be done, but during the past edition,

many fascinating topics concerning markets and distribution were raised, some of which may eventually be implemented.

Boato: What are the primary channels for distributing this type of work at the moment, and how may they be improved?

Rosenthal: I think festivals are generally where you will see the most variety of work. Additionally, important global locations, such as Phi Centre in Montreal[9] have invested substantially in its exhibitions and programs. A lot of activity is occurring in private spaces, for example in London, as people create innovative immersive exhibitions. So, there are many new entertainment venues. I believe it would be crucial to use the new black box entertainment venues being constructed as new cultural and performing arts centres. There are several problems with immersive art, like managing an exhibition is clearly quite expensive, and many cultural venues themselves are also inadequate in terms of space. A few years ago, I visited Shanghai and Beijing, where I saw new large-scale black box cultural venues that could be used effectively for immersive exhibitions.

Reilhac: Yes, there is a lack of curated access to non-gaming immersive content. You can access games very easily, but no online platforms or physical venues are identified with more creative and artistic narrative content. Not many places specialise in VR or have experience with the technology. Certain locations can purchase or rent VR programs and use them as a side activity or something they find fascinating, but most of them lack expertise. They cannot handle any type of problem, malfunction, or anything that goes wrong.

Boato: You focused only on location-based distribution, but what about distribution at home using personal headsets, for instance?

Reilhac: Publishing a work online is challenging. For instance, the Meta[10] library is difficult to access for several reasons. First, there is moral censorship. Any nudity, sex, or politically controversial imagery is not permitted. Everything must be super clean, but they are perfectly fine with the most extreme violence. We had the experience during COVID of having to present online on Meta and HTC Vive.[11] They rejected some pieces we had chosen because there was either too much nudity or sexual scenes that would be perfectly acceptable in a film. Then, they test the piece and may request that you re-do or re-edit an entire section, if they believe there is insufficient light or if they dislike something. The duration is becoming a problem too. The audience seems to prefer to pay more for a longer experience, and online platforms do not give any value to the short-experience public. So, people are unwilling to pay for short content. It is completely different on Steam,[12] which is much more open and much freer, but it is completely invisible. Anything you do on Steam is invisible, especially if it is not a game. Finally, Head-Mounted Displays (HMDs) have

content departments that are completely focused on financing and delivering significant IP and game material, rather than content exhibited at Venice and on the festival circuit. Consequently, because the industry is still in its early stages, the content is distributed by the same companies that create the headsets. It is a closed circuit and a real monopoly.

Rosenthal: Meta is of course a really significant player, but if you look at their store, you will find a limited number of projects from the Venice Immersive program. They are primarily focused on games and other apps rather than this kind of creative content, and they publish mostly the projects that they finance, which is a serious problem as at the moment they are focused only on gaming and content that is related to big brand IP. Therefore, they are likely to choose shooting games rather than short experimental pieces. As they are hardware companies, content is a different entity that may not fit well with the business' organisational structure. Physical locations are the most important distribution venues for creative content at the moment due to this issue and the fact that headsets are still a niche product for consumers.

Boato: How might the immersive market be improved?

Reilhac: Numerous critical points need consideration. Data are lacking on how things are produced, distributed, and measured in terms of success. Furthermore, the distribution model is directly inspired by the film distribution model, which is inappropriate as it is not the same medium and not the same method of interacting with the content or the stories. I believe we require a more audience-focused mindset as well as something that can truly spark attention for non-gaming immersive content. Let me give you an example. There is a VR multi-player experience called *L'Horizon de Khéops*,^[13] about the pyramids of Egypt, which is quite successful in China. According to Chinese professionals, everyone is expecting this kind of work right now. Everything that provides a communal, social, user experience prevails over single-player works. Understanding these audience patterns is important from the start of the production.

Rosenthal: But to get there, we will need easier access to technology and spaces that can showcase immersive experiences. The knowledge barrier related to how people are introduced to the medium is significant. Artists cannot learn about it unless they try. That is a serious problem. So, the most crucial thing to do at the beginning of any lab or program is to show immersive works. Creators need to enter the medium to fully understand it.

Boato: Do you think that Venice Immersive can help with this task?

Rosenthal: Venice Immersive is the biggest immersive exhibition – so yes, we can. Even if our audience is really large worldwide, I believe that every single digital art venue should be

present at Venice Immersive, as it is a fantastic opportunity for people to not only learn about the newest works but also to just imagine what they may create in their own spaces.

Authors

Anja Boato is a PhD candidate in Music and Performing Arts at Sapienza University of Rome. Her research project concerns cinematic virtual reality (Cine-VR) and its application to immersive experiences in film festivals. She has written about transmedia storytelling, fandom studies, and popular culture. Her publications include 'Il fandom delle serie TV e l'esperienza dello shipping' in *Mediascapes Journal* (n. 14), and the book *Shipping. Uno sguardo sociologico sui fandom romantici* (Edizioni Epoké, 2022).

Michel Reilhac is an immersive storyteller, making films in Virtual Reality, creating participatory experiences in real life and across media. He is the founding curator of Venice Immersive, the official competition of creative VR content for the Venice International Film Festival. He is head of studies for the Venice Biennale College Cinema and for the Venice Biennale College Cinema VR. He is a curator of the VR section for Seriesmania in Lille. He lectures on, coaches, and produces immersive media. Reilhac was formerly a dancer and executive director for several national dance and theatre institutions in France, head of the Forum des Images in Paris between 1992 and 2001, and was responsible for acquisitions and production of 30 independent films each year between 2002-2012). He was named Man of the Year in film in 2013 by *Le Film Français*. He is currently developing an international and Pan-African writers' residency on the island of Lamu, Kenya.

Liz Rosenthal is curator of Venice Immersive. She is also the executive producer of award-winning immersive content and helped found and lead pioneering incubator and accelerator programme CreativeXR, managed by Arts Council England and Digital Catapult. She is CEO & Founder of trailblazing innovation company Power to the Pixel. She has an extensive network and knowledge of international talent, financiers, and distributors across the immersive entertainment and arts space. Throughout her career, Rosenthal has helped international media businesses and artists to innovate and adapt their practice to evolving platforms, tools, and audiences. She has advised countless leading international festivals, media organisations, and national and regional funds. Rosenthal began her media career in the film business. She set up and ran the UK office for Next Wave Films, a division of Independent Film Channel in the US from 1998 to 2002. Next Wave was a pioneer in the production, finance, and sales of micro-budget features and digital filmmaking.

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Notes

- [1] Paulo Baratta served as the president of the Venice Biennale from 1998 to 2001 and was re-elected to the position, serving another term from 2008 to 2020.
- [2] Alberto Barbera has been the artistic director of the Venice Film Festival since 2011.
- [3] The Raindance Film Festival is an annual event held in London, featuring a competition called Raindance Immersive for XR works. For further details on the immersive programme in 2023, please refer to the official website: <https://www.raindanceimmersive.com/> (accessed on 10 April 2023).
- [4] Michael Salmon is an award-winning XR producer, founder of KRAKED and Associated Industries & Altered Realities
- [5] For further details on Fins' works, refer to the interviews conducted by Kent Bye for The Voice of VR Podcast: <https://voicesofvr.com/1143-vrchat-world-builder-fins-and-his-3-experiences-in-venice-immersive-2022-treasure-heist-magic-heist-and-district-roboto/> (accessed on 10 March 2024).
- [6] The term DoF stands for Degrees of Freedom. Immersive works related to Virtual Reality may involve either 3 DoF, where they rotate around only three axes without spatial movement, or 6 DoF, allowing users to move within the space. For more information, see Fuchs & Moreau & Guitton 2011.
- [7] Tribeca Festival is an annual film festival held in New York City, featuring a competition of immersive works. For further details on the immersive programme in 2023, refer to the official website: <https://tribecafilm.com/press-center/festival/press-releases/tribeca-festival-reveals-2023-immersive-lineup> (accessed on 10 March 2023).
- [8] South by Southwest (abbreviated as SXSW) is a festival held in Austin, Texas, with an important interactive section. For further details on the immersive programme in 2023, see the following article published by MixedX: <https://mixed-news.com/en/sxsw-2023-all-vr-experiences-and-vr-films-at-a-glance/> (accessed on 10 March 2024).
- [9] For further details on Phi Centre, refer to the official website: <https://phi.ca/en/centre/> (accessed on 10 March 2024).
- [10] Meta Platforms acquired the VR headset manufacturer Oculus in 2014. For more information on the history of Oculus and Meta, see Harris 2019.
- [11] HTC Vive is a virtual reality device built by Valve Corporation, a US videogame company, in partnership with HTC, a Taiwanese consumer electronics company.
- [12] Steam is a digital distribution platform developed by Valve Corporation, primarily focused on videogame works. In 2015, it introduced SteamVR, a separate section for virtual reality experiences that work with a variety of devices.
- [13] For more information about the experience, refer to the official website: <https://horizonkheops.com/en/> (accessed on 10 March 2024).