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Why (film) festivals? Virtual reality experiences at a crossroads



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It was in October 2015 at Festival du Nouveau Cinéma (FNC) that I first encountered virtual reality (VR) as we know it today. Since then, I have attended every edition of the festival's Explore section, anxious to discover what immersive and interactive experiences it had in store. Although I could never afford to attend any of the major festivals that showcased VR (e.g. Sundance, Tribeca, SXSW, Cannes, Venice, and IDFA), I was content in knowing that some of the year's best new media programming found its way to Montreal every October. My relationship with the festival culminated in 2023 when I was invited to serve as guest programmer for the very section I had so assiduously attended for the past few years.

Looking back at the hundreds of projects I experienced over the years at FNC Explore, I am shocked at how few of them ever gained widespread distribution. This issue highlights a crucial distinction. Film festivals are venues for showcasing new projects, not resources meant to ensure long-term access to titles. To wit, the premiere status required by festivals can impede the circulation of VR projects and, by extension, limit access overall. So, while we might say, following Marijke de Valck, that film festivals offer an alternative to distribution[1] or that they serve as one solution to the "vexing" problem of film distribution', as Diane Burgess put it,[2] VR also currently faces different challenges than the forms of cinema these authors were discussing. Indeed, while the spotlight afforded by film festivals is nontrivial, I would argue that what VR needs right now – considering that it is still

trying to find its footing as a medium more than a decade after its resurgence in the early 2010s – is a robust distribution network of its own, as well as ways of ensuring access to a vast catalogue of projects that risk being lost to time otherwise.

In this essay, my goal is to go over the tumultuous story of the inclusion of VR in film festival programming since 2012 to highlight some of the problems this relationship may have caused the budding art form. More specifically, I reflect on what it means for VR as a burgeoning creative medium that film festivals have served as a dominant site of exhibition. How can we reconcile the needs of this nascent technology with the limitations imposed by an existing medium?

This reflection stems from years of personal experience with VR and film festivals – as an aficionado, a critic, a programmer, and a researcher working both within academia and on industry-focused projects, namely during my time at Québec/Canada XR, a French-language think-tank focussed on immersive media in Québec.[3] Part of my responsibilities during this mandate included collaborating on a research project that dealt with distribution challenges in the VR industry, which led to the publication of a report titled ‘Crafting a Market for Independent XR’, along with a handful of interviews and ancillary articles (<https://independent-xr-market.org>). Some of the observations made in the course of this work inspired the present reflection.

While drawing from this past experience, I also reached out to the curators of Venice Immersive (Michel Reilhac and Liz Rosenthal) and Tribeca Immersive (Ana Brzezińska) to verify some of my hypotheses and nuance my own opinions. And while this contribution highlights several points of criticism regarding the limitations imposed by film festivals on the nascent VR industry, I also conclude by pointing to some of the benefits that stem from this pairing.

Looking back

As I set out to question the role film festivals have played in the emergence of VR, it is important to remember that this relationship is a relatively new phenomenon. In the 1980s-1990s, VR was being adopted by different industries and used in a variety of contexts. Some enterprising individuals even thought of creating art with these immersive tools originally designed for military and industrial applications. Stewart Dickson and Michael Scroggins’s *Topological Slide* (1991), Brenda Laurel’s *Placeholder* (1994), and Char Davies’ *Osmose* (1995) and *Éphémère* (1998) are but a few such examples. These experiences were not presented in film festivals, however, but rather in trade or tech conferences such as the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) or the Association for Computing Machinery’s Special

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Interest Group on Computer Graphics and Interactive Techniques event (SIGGRAPH). Or, in the case of more artistically inclined creations, VR also found its way into contemporary art galleries[4] or public art centers.[5]

Meanwhile, some attempts were made to bring VR entertainment to the masses, with the likes of the Nintendo Virtual Boy or Jonathan Waldern's *Virtuality* arcade cabinets. However, this period of VR history was short-lived. Indeed, while articles about the 'death' of VR have been prevalent in recent years, VR first 'died' in the late 1990s when it failed to deliver on the promises of its most enthusiastic backers.[6] VR was mostly absent from the public eye at that time. However, it continued to be used in university, industry, and military research contexts throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s. So where and how did its love affair with film festivals get started?

In 2012 – after a fifteen or so year hiatus – VR rose from the grave. Most VR enthusiasts probably remember it as the year the Oculus Rift launched its campaign on the crowdfunding platform Kickstarter.[7] But already in January of that year, Nonny de la Peña took the Sundance Film Festival by storm with her powerful immersive journalism piece *Hunger in L.A.*[8] Since then, film festivals have served as a platform of choice for launching immersive projects by artists native to the medium and by filmmakers exploring what these new technologies have to offer. Felix and Paul Studios, perhaps one of the best-known producers of immersive content at the time of writing, brought their first VR project *Strangers with Patrick Watson* (2014) to South by Southwest (SXSW), Tribeca, International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA), and Sundance in 2014-15. Not so long after, Alejandro González Iñárritu chose the 2017 Cannes Film Festival to launch his monumental *Carne y Arena* – likely the most discussed VR experience to date.

The relationship was mutual: in order for artists to flock to film festivals to showcase their immersive works, festivals first had to open their doors to this novel medium. The Venice Biennale, well-known as the oldest film festival in the world, famously welcomed VR as part of its official selection and competition in 2017, putting it on equal footing with the rest of the film programming. According to Michel Reilhac and Liz Rosenthal, co-curators of Venice Immersive, this unprecedented gesture may be explained by the Biennale's historical inclusion of myriad art forms.[9] Although VR only became part of Cannes's official selection in 2024, it has been featured in its *Marché du Film* starting in 2014 as part of the NEXT Pavilion.[10] Meanwhile, Canada's longest-running film festival, Festival du Nouveau Cinéma, has used its 'Explore' section to offer audiences a glimpse at the newest trends in cinematic storytelling since 2014. Finally, Hot Docs and imagineNATIVE have each experimented with new media programs since 2015, as discussed by Caroline Klimek.[11]

The author also offers a stimulating analysis of the way festivals have framed these projects as part of their programming, and of the motivations behind these choices.

The increasing popularity of VR at film festivals is particularly clear on film submission platforms. In a 2020 review of VR in film festivals, Niv Fux noted that 'the festival submission platform FilmFreeway listed no less than 1,249 festivals that include VR in their programs'.^[12] Since then that number has climbed to 1,800.^[13]



Fig. 1: VR shares the main stage with the film programming at the award ceremony for the 2023 Festival du Nouveau Cinéma. Photo by Philippe Bédard.

Why (film) festivals? Why now?

When I asked the curator of Tribeca Immersive, Ana Brzezińska, why she thinks VR artists were drawn to film festivals of all places, she offered the following analogy: 'Maybe independent immersive creators went on to exhibit at film festivals, especially documentary, or art-related festivals, because they were looking for a shelter that nobody else would have provided them with.'^[14] Whether they offer markets, potential co-production deals, or platforms to discuss the latest topics in the field, festivals serve as a key meeting point, or node,^[15] for a burgeoning industry. But what do film festivals have that existing industry-focused VR events (e.g. Laval Virtual, Augmented World Expo, etc.) do not already offer?

For Reilhac and Rosenthal, festivals give artists working with emerging immersive media the recognition needed to legitimise their craft as more than just a gimmick: 'the way Michel and I have designed this section is very much about proving that this is an art form that has value and that should be treated in the same way as films in an A-list festival'.^[16] During the

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Biennale, VR shares the stage with the rest of the film selection. Teams who flew in to represent their work get to walk the red carpet. The winning projects are awarded with the same trophy as feature films. Finally, the potential press coverage is an important boon. As Rosenthal puts it, 'the level of international press who are at Venice would not be at an XR event'.^[17] Although not every festival places VR on equal footing with the rest of its programming – the same might be said of short film, documentary, or experimental programs in festivals where feature-length fiction films typically dominate – the spotlight it affords VR in major press outlets is significant.

In some respects, film festivals seem to play the same role for VR today that they played for independent films and national cinemas over the years. But is this solution adequate in the current context? For VR experiences from established producers or for those who already have the backing of major distribution platforms (i.e. Meta Quest, Viveport, Steam), festivals are used to give a boost and to help projects stand out among a sea of video games, fitness applications, and miscellaneous utilities that flood these all-purpose digital storefronts. But for smaller projects that might never get released on mainstream platforms, festivals are not an alternative – they are the only option.

According to Rosenthal, 'a lot of the programme we show is not destined for platforms because they have become more and more conservative in terms of the projects they allow'. As companies such as Meta invest billions of dollars into making sure their proprietary devices become the de facto option for mainstream consumers,^[18] family-friendly content has been prioritised over risky artistic endeavours. While I understand the reasoning for this decision, this level of editorial interference has proven problematic. This is especially damning in the early stages of an industry's formation.

The case study in this context is *In the Mist* (Chou Tung-Yen, 2020), a Taiwanese 360° film that invites viewers on a dream-like foray into a steam-filled gay sauna. The film was shown at Venice in 2021, but not at any of the festival's satellite events,^[19] due to the project not being allowed on Viveport (the online platform used for the virtual components of the festival) because of the film's topic and depictions of nudity. Even when it was selected at Festival du Nouveau Cinéma that same year, the project was included in the programming but not actually shown, again due to the festival's reliance on Viveport. When even audiences who travel to a festival cannot access a project, it paints a bleak picture of the state of access to independent VR productions.

At a time when access to innovative titles is blocked by major platforms, the responsibility falls on viewers, critics, and oral historians to document their experience to ensure they

survive in some shape or form.[20] Fifteen years later, Hito Steyerl's conclusions still ring true:

resistant or non-conformist visual matter disappeared from the surface into an underground of alternative archives and collections, kept alive only by a network of committed organizations and individuals, who would circulate bootlegged VHS copies amongst themselves.[21]

The main difference is that today's amateur archivist must maintain a collection of legacy hardware and a store of project builds obtained by whatever means necessary.

If you build it, they will come

Whether it is as a researcher, critic, or curator, I have been critical of the fealty of VR to the film festival model, its practices, and most of all the hallowed status of premieres. If VR is indeed a new medium and if it continues to face difficulties finding adequate distribution models, why should it be subjected to holdovers from pre-existing media such as premiere status, especially when this comes at the cost of widespread distribution? Specifically, since access to adequate hardware is necessary to even experience VR, why should we want to limit where in the world a project is screened at any given time? Finally, why should VR be beholden to the limited duration of film festivals when longer exhibits or permanent collections would do more good at this point in time?

While Reilhac agrees that 'we are definitely prisoners of the film model in festivals', the curator is careful to propose that 'mimicking the logic of a film release and premiere has more benefits than downsides'. [22] With this in mind, and while there is plenty to criticise still about the way VR has been handled in film festivals, I do want to conclude this essay by pointing to what these events offer.

The most important thing festivals – and cultural institutions in general – can do to benefit the continued growth of VR as an artistic medium is to help audiences first encounter this nascent art form. 'As many of these new media works are not available to the general public,' Klimek writes, 'film festivals are the only point of access for audiences, a major stakeholder for film festivals.' [23] While many narrative experiences run on commodity VR hardware, very few people actually have access to such material at home. Film festivals make the necessary hardware accessible, even if only for a short period of time.



Fig. 2: A volunteer moderator trying out one of the VR experiences at the 2023 FNC Explore exhibit. Photo by Philippe Bédard.

More importantly, such events also make use of docents to ensure audiences enjoy their experience with VR, especially if it is their first; and recent data seems to suggest many people have still yet to try VR. For instance, Julie Tremblay, who produced the hugely successful VR experience *The Infinite*, estimates that of the 70,000 people that came to see the exhibit during its first stint in Montreal, an estimated 70% had never tried VR before.[24] Speaking from personal experience as someone who put VR headsets on audience members of the 2023 FNC explore selection for nine hours every day during the programme's ten-day run, I estimate that 50% of people were still encountering immersive media for the first time. This proportion can be explained by the exhibit's positioning within Cinémathèque Québécoise – a major venue for the festival – which meant patrons often stumbled upon the VR selection with no prior knowledge of its existence.

Returning to the importance of mediators, the first suggestion Klimek makes for programmers hoping to add VR to their lineup is to 'take into account the time needed to introduce festival audiences to new media'.[25] This includes the time needed to teach audiences how to use the equipment, as well as how to navigate virtual reality environments. These steps are crucial in democratising this new artform, not only because of the steep learning curve of some experiences and the technical hiccups that still regularly occur, but also because of the potentially overwhelming effect immersive media can have over those

who are not familiar with its affordances. To borrow a phrase from Eddie Lou, founder of the Sandbox Immersive Festival in Beijing: ‘The first time someone tries VR is perhaps the most important, as it colours their view of the landscape.’[26]

Where do we go from here?

‘Festivals are temporary spaces built by people on the move,’ Brzezińska tells me. Temporary as they might have initially been, festivals – and film festivals specifically – have played and continue to play a key role in the development of VR as a creative medium since 2012. As the curator also suggests, makeshift solutions are often those that last the longest:

In post-Soviet countries, there is a saying that temporary solutions last forever. You build something cheap, ad-hoc, and fifteen years later, you realize this was the part of your furniture that best stood the test of time. This is what happened to XR.[27]

As an avid viewer of novel immersive experiences, I am thankful for what film festivals have offered me over the years. But as someone who wishes this technology would finally come into its own as an established artform, whether mainstream or niche, I cannot help but bemoan what limitations film festivals impose on a young industry. VR is neither quite film, nor is really just videogames, theatre, dance or any existing artform. So why should it be tied to the way these existing industries have conducted their business?

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Notes

- [1] de Valck 2008, p. 92.
- [2] Burgess 2012.
- [3] A full list of my non-academic publications (reviews, reports, etc.) can be found here: <https://bedphil.com/en/publications/#Cultu>
- [4] Osmose, for instance, was shown at the CODE exhibit (1995) in New York's Ricco-Maresca Gallery and as a solo exhibit at Montreal's Musée d'Art Contemporain (1995). For more information see <https://digitalartarchive.at/database/general/work/osmose.html>
- [5] Such as the Banff Center for the Arts and its pioneering 'Art and virtual environments' project. See Moser & MacLeod 1996.
- [6] For a deeper look at the death of VR in the 1990s and its recent rebirth, see Bédard 2024 (forthcoming). See also Strain 1999; Ryan 2001; Ditlea 1998; Donovan 2010.
- [7] The campaign closed in September 2012 with \$2.4M in crowdfunding <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1523379957/oculus-rift-step-into-the-game>
- [8] For a complete history, see Kent Bye's interviews with Nonny de la Peña: '#6: Nonny de la Peña on Immersive Journalism, Empathy in VR storytelling, Human Rights, Virtual Identity, Diversity in VR & collaborating with Palmer Luckey at USC', *Voices of VR*, episode 6, 2014. <https://voicesofvr.com/6-nony-de-la-pena-on-immersive-journalism-empathy-vr-storytelling-human-rights-virtual-identity-diversity-in-vr-collaborating-with-palmer-luckey-at-usc/>; '#1067: Nonny de la Peña Wins a Legacy Peabody Award for Her Work in Immersive Journalism, A Retrospective Interview', *Voices of VR*, episode 1067, 2022. <https://voicesofvr.com/1067-nony-de-la-pena-wins-a-legacy-peabody-award-for-her-work-in-immersive-journalism-a-retrospective-interview/>.
- [9] Interview by the author, 4 December 2023.
- [10] Roy 2015.

- [11] Klimek 2018.
- [12] Fux 2020.
- [13] <https://bit.ly/2XbVDW0> (accessed on 5 December 2023).
- [14] Personal correspondence dated 27 November 2023. Brzezińska Also published an expanded version of the correspondence to her Substack. See Brzezińska 2023.
- [15] See Iordanova 2015. See also Klimek's article, which discusses some of the reasons why festivals might want to experiment with new media programming. Finally, see Fux's article for another point of view on the way festivals have dealt with the integration of VR.
- [16] Liz Rosenthal, interview by the author, 4 December 2023.
- [17] XR, or extended reality, is an all-encompassing term which covers virtual, augmented, and mixed realities, as well as many ancillary immersive techniques and practices.
- [18] Dean 2022.
- [19] In 2020 and 2021, Venice partnered with galleries across the world to host their immersive program, allowing people to access the selection without having to travel amid a global pandemic.
- [20] See Kent Bye's interview with In the Mist creator Chou Tung-Yen. Bye 2023.
- [21] Steyerl 2009.
- [22] Michel Reilhac, interview by the author, 4 December 2023.
- [23] Klimek 'From Programmer to Curator', p. 74.
- [24] Bédard 2022.
- [25] Klimek 'From Programmer to Curator', p. 82.
- [26] 'Crafting a Market for Independent XR', 2022, p. 54: <https://independent-xr-market.org/report-40b722f9a2f3>.
- [27] Ana Brzezińska, personal correspondence with the author dated 27 November 2023. See also Brzezińska, 'A Monday Ode to Fests'.