A VISION FOR WOMEN AND VIRTUAL REALITY

A WORLD OF POSSIBILITY FOR WOMEN

A VISION FOR WOMEN AND THE VIRTUAL REALITY INDUSTRY

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There is a high likelihood that within our lifetimes it will sit alongside the cultural heavyweights of music, theatre, the written word, games, spoken word, visual art and film & television. By 2020 the VR content market is forecast to take $14 billion in revenue\(^1\). To put this into perspective, the well established global movie industry made $38.6 billion in box office sales in 2016\(^2\). Give it a few decades and VR revenues will most certainly catch up.

Take any one existing media industry: it will, without doubt have had a significant impact on your life, regardless of whether or not you work in that sector. Media is not only a mirror of society but a catalyst for social change; an embedder of norms, an amplifier of stereotypes and a site for humanity’s hopes, fears and dreams to be enacted. In this regard, VR will be no different.

What is different is that it’s a much newer form of media. It is setting off on the early stages of its journey; a journey where it will find its place in society. As this type of content becomes a part of mainstream culture it will, in turn, be shaped by that culture. In Autumn 2017, a group of women who work in the fledgling UK VR industry came together for two days to explore how VR, as it evolves, can show off our society’s best self, with regards to gender equality.

We live in a society where, for many, the state of women’s rights, opportunities and representation is the fairest it has ever been. Things should be in the best shape to craft a new medium that serves women as much as men. We are hopeful. But the industry is also vulnerable.
The industry is vulnerable because the quest for true equality still has a long way to go. Women are still paid less than men, taken less seriously, and are less likely to raise investment. There are still more men called John leading FTSE 100 boards than women. Women are more likely to suffer sexual abuse or rape at work (and out of work)³. Our physical attributes and dress are heavily scrutinised. Things are even tougher if you are a woman of colour, trans woman, or a woman who identifies as disabled. Issues of discrimination are exponentially compounded by race, sexuality, background, presentation and age.

Look at the statistics and it is clear – VR is in its infancy and even at this early stage it is easier to access and achieve success if you are a man. This will remain the status quo unless active interventions are made. We can learn from #TimesUp, #NotSurprised, #MeToo, and act now.

This is a timely challenge and the stakes are high. It is a challenge that is not about the industry in a vacuum, it is about the impact on audiences. Something we can learn from the development of other communication mediums is around the impact of creator’s own bias’ on the end product. Look at the male dominated structures of Hollywood for instance: now understood to be an industry where sexual harassment towards women is commonplace, an ‘open secret’ and a lack of accurate representation results in a woman getting a lead role in only 22% of Hollywood movie releases⁴,⁵ (even though women actually make up a larger proportion of movie audiences than men)⁶.

It’s well understood that product bias has affected the film industry since its genesis, for instance, colour film was only chemically designed to accurately replicate white skin, and light meters used in cinema today are still calibrated for whiteness as default⁷,⁸. Bias in products can even kill: seat belts were built and tested with male crash dummies: women have been more likely to get injured or die in car crashes than men for decades⁹.

VR is very often described as transformative. Its ability to simulate an entire reality means commentators and researchers have observed it as being particularly good at causing behavioural change in its users¹⁰. This means it can also be particularly good at transferring and strengthening bias’. If the VR industry as a whole is primarily male, white, and expressing any lack of diversity, then the social change it propagates will also be stifled by those conditions.
This brings us to the purpose of this document. The VR industry does not have to serve or reinforce the imbalance of representation in mainstream media or tech industries. We have a golden opportunity right now to craft VR into an inclusive and healthy sector that learns from the mistakes of other media industries.

We can choose to craft an industry where teams are representative of the population and where everyone is equally valued, regardless of their identity. Evidence from numerous studies demonstrates that this will lead to higher quality, more profitable products.

From our workshop, we felt that the best place to start was by outlining a vision which was then broken down into more detail. However, we also felt that we shouldn’t have to treat this exercise as blue-sky thinking.

Genuine equality should not be seen as a dream. We should expect it.

This vision statement is a set of expectations that address what we have perceived as some of the main issues surrounding women and VR.

We acknowledge that our understandings of equality identified within the workshop come from our own particular lived experiences of the individuals present. Although our group represented women in the current VR industry, the group was not representative of the population, nor the full spectrum of gender identity. We acknowledge that our outlined perception of equality is therefore limited, and that the expectations that follow should not be seen as a catch-all list, but rather an invitation for further input into this project, and to initiate and prompt further scrutiny of the state of gender and VR.
The way the industry is presented to the rest of the world will have a huge influence over whether people feel like it’s the kind of space they could envision dedicating their career to. This is the beginning of the career pipeline, where individuals form assumptions and associations that will guide their career decision-making in years to come:

• We expect VR to be represented by the mainstream press as a significant technological and cultural development that is gender neutral.

• We expect VR to be covered equally by publications and media aimed at women as men.

• We expect headsets, content and VR accessories to be designed, manufactured and marketed equally to men, women and gender neutral.

• If a shop sells a mobile VR headset, they will place them in a gender neutral part of the shop floor or website.

• These opportunities to represent the industry are as likely to be about the commercial or the creative side of VR as they are about the challenge of gender equality within the industry.

• We expect women to be given equal opportunities to their male counterparts in representing the industry to the outside world.

• As many women as there are men will align themselves with, and be proponents of Virtual Reality within the public sphere.

• As histories of Virtual Reality are presented, early female VR pioneers will be as central to VR’s narrative as their male counterparts.
ROLES AND TEAMS

There is no ‘normal’ template for a VR landscape, organisation or team yet. As roles in the VR industry are being shaped, here are our expectations:

• Women will be given tasks or job roles based on their genuine skills, knowledge and ambitions.

• No particular set of skills — social, technical or otherwise — will be assumed of an applicant because of their gender.

• Hiring managers and HR professionals will be aware of their unconscious bias when hiring a team, and take steps to counteract it.

• In relation to a VR production and industry context – women and men will share the emotional labour of the creative team equally.

• Equal pay for employees will be given for equally important, integral and responsible roles within that organisation.

• A homogenous make-up of a business or production team will be viewed as poor and arid. Potential investors, for instance, would see this as a weakness.

• Women will be sought after within, and attracted to, tech or engineering roles. They will be facilitated to access these roles and thrive in them.

• The stereotype of the ‘innovator’, ‘auteur’, ‘creative genius’ or ‘pioneer’ will not be associated with a gender.

• Equal merit for employees will be given for equally important, integral and responsible roles within that organisation. All roles will be made accessible to men and women within a company.

• Gender will not influence the overall likelihood of being in a highly paid role or more junior role.

• Job roles, and expectations associated with that role, will be outlined in such a way that they will not be at odds with family or career commitments.
PRODUCTS AND COMMISSIONING

When VR truly reaches the mainstream, the initial content selection available should feature a female and gender neutral point of view as often as a male point of view. A VR industry made primarily for men, by men is the worst case scenario.

- Creators should ‘check’ their work is inclusive, with an industry standard like the Bechdel Test.
- It will be prevalent for the underlying values around the communication of gender in each VR experience to be scrutinised and evaluated both internally and externally.

- Gender neutral VR content, and content aimed at women will be totally commonplace.
- Content aimed at women and gender neutrally will be given equal resource to content aimed at men.
- Content proposed by female staff will be given equal resource to content posed by male staff.
- Content proposed by female staff will not be assumed to only appeal to a female audience.
- The Virtual Reality products you buy fit your body – regardless of your age, race, gender, body or hair type.
- User-testing groups will be representative of the population.
- The industry feels a responsibility to create safe virtual spaces and takes action to ensure them.
Culture is crucial: it transfers through to the product and its audience’s understanding of themselves. It will also hugely affect talent retention. An industry culture that objectifies, bullies or diminishes women will not retain them. An industry that supports women, providing them equal access and opportunity, at all stages of career, is much more likely to retain them.

• Organisations understand that flexible working is better for most staff members, but that this addition also specifically doesn’t exclude team members who, for whatever reason, cannot commit to more traditional working hours.\(^\text{13}\)

• If someone of any gender needs to take time off work to look after a family member (child, partner, parent, sibling etc) then this is considered normal and acceptable.

• Intelligence and talent are central to the way women are appreciated in the workplace. Physical presentation is never considered relevant.

• Organisations will have channels in place to discuss workplace discrimination as commonplace. Organisations will be committed to understanding and responding to feedback received. This may include structural change and being prepared to consult external organisations.

• Sexual objectification or sexual harassment will never be tolerated and will never be part of the work culture.

• There is zero tolerance to sexual abuse and rape.

• There is a culture toward genuine allyship, understanding and advocacy for people of all genders.

It is everyone’s responsibility to address the imbalance of representation in the industry and not just the responsibility of the underrepresented. Both men and women in the VR industry should be proactive on issues of gender imbalance.

We invite organisations to compare their practices with the vision presented in this manifesto and commit to long term investigation and critique of any practices that are at odds with what this group (and hopefully others going forward) have presented.

Together, we can learn from the mistakes that past industries made in their early days and craft a sector that represents society’s best self, rather than its worst. The potential for female VR creators and audiences is vast – let us seize it together.
FOOTNOTES


5. This statistic is even further diminished if cross referenced by age or by race.


12. It is frequently noted that VR headsets and Subpacks fit poorly onto female bodies, smaller bodies and cannot accommodate afro hair - a clear indication of who, at the moment, the VR industry’s ‘standard’ user is.

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