



MITCHAM VR FESTIVAL 2020 by Pedro Ferreira

Thinking it over in my head I entered a world of imaginative possibilities. There was no other explanation, the barriers between reality and virtual reality didn't exist anymore. So it was I attended the 2020 Mitcham Virtual Reality Festival as part of Film Merton, which has been using the past year to get more people within the Merton borough watching more movies. This festival is a showcase for up and coming directors to show their virtual reality movies to members of the public who have never experienced anything like it before. The festival was free to every one of all ages to attend with the festival taking place inside a Merton social club. I attended the launch day. Organised by Digital Drama the two day event utilises various techniques to display short movies and in one case a game using virtual headsets as well as electronic tablets. As someone who has never bothered with VR this was an opportunity I didn't want to pass over.

The festival began with the standard introduction and also four short movies funded by the council. These short amateur films present Merton as a setting to tell stories. The first film entitled *The Streets That Shape Us* is the story of friendship between two individuals, told through a series of disconnected and unattached events. Next *The Wimbledon Football Club Story as Told in Lego*. Rather self-explanatory but pretty amazing when compared to Hollywood budgets of Warner Bros *Lego* movie series. Next was *His Name was Gerry*, a comedic but also touching tale of a young man who is helped through the death of his pet hamster by a tough girl. Finally we have *Just Delivered*, a film about the daily life of a food delivery man who is desperate to have a proper career.

After that everyone moved onto the VR headsets dotted around the environment. Now I had received a preview of some of these shorts so I'll go through them first. *Gloomy Eyes* is a multi award-winning claymation style series of shorts narrated by Colin Farrell. It tells the story of a zombie kid called Gloomy who falls in love with a mortal girl called Nena. The world created here has been plunged into darkness by mankind's selfish history. It's both a love story and a morality tale about environmental neglect. The experience itself is totally three dimensional as the user wearing the headset can look around the environment as the story is told. I was able for instance to see under a bridge not visible at normal height unless you bend down. Truly amazing to watch and definitely deserves its accolades. *Crackle Pop* is a short 360 degree documentary that deals with the strange and overlooked neurological phenomenon known as Synesthesia. We are taught about how some can relate sound to colour. As an autistic someone who relates colour to numbers and letters I understood where the documentary was coming from. Being a 360 degree experience allowed sound and colour to be superimposed over a real filmed stage area. The lack of money spent on this short is really the only thing holding it back. Also it doesn't mention whether Synesthesia depending on the type creates conflict in people's everyday lives. The other preview I watched was BBC's *Judi Dench: My Oak Tree VR*, a nature and science documentary in which Dench tries to show us how trees can save our planet by showing us inside one of them. Immersive isn't the word with the viewer being plunged through the molecules of the tree. It's fun to a certain extent however Dench's scientific narration gets lost somewhat among the molecular effects and by the end it doesn't have much to say other than the obvious "save the environment" which is pretty obvious to anyone watching this.

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I didn't have time to experience all the VR shorts but got to still experience a couple. To my right an elderly woman is trying a headset for *Bro Bots*, a UK animated adventure series for children. No, not yet. I see a headset for *The Curious Tale of Stolen Pets* free. This wasn't a short film but as it turned out a game. To play it means standing on a floor cornered off with tape in front of everybody. I take the risk. I knew puzzles were involved but what type? Putting on the headset I find myself inside a tiny bedroom. Tapping with one of what can only be described as a Wii style nunchuck I am zapped inside a painting where a small island with little creatures sits in front of me. I'm told we not only have to search for these little critters but also solve puzzles to locate them. The game plays as a puzzle adventure with a small dose of the hidden object genre. Finding objects scattered around isn't too difficult but completing the puzzles takes a lot of work. I only realise afterwards that the island while it can be rotated can also be walked around. Not that this helps as I'm terrible at puzzle games and adventures which is why I normally use a walkthrough. It's a nice little game and I'm sure this is planned at some point if not already for Steam but those puzzles... Moving on I go back to the seating area and it occurs to me how crazed I must of looked wearing headset while bending down and futilely pulling on objects that aren't really there. I notice this when I see the Deputy Mayor of Merton with a headset on watching *Bro Bots*. He's constantly looking around like he's suffering from extreme paranoia. Now I realise how it feels but I really should play *Bro Bots*. I put one of the available headsets on to watch the first part of this UK creation. *Bro Bots* as I mentioned before was made for children featuring two British police robots working for the NYPD called Otis and Roberto. The bots are on a dangerous assignment at the heart of Botcorp but this (at least on the first viewing experience) gets lost in what I would describe as akin to a 3D theme park ride. We're taken over the city and into streets with flying cars that wiz by. I take the headset off and it seems the kids next to me enjoyed it as well. With the level of immersion the series does I can see why it's popular. It's a no brainer these shorts deserve a full TV series; the merchandising opportunities for these characters are endless. Out of all the shorts experienced here *Bro Bots* has the most potential for being a franchise.

Finally I go next door to what's called an 'AR' experience. It's an experience detailing Wimbledon Fair a good hundred years ago. I am given an iPad or a tablet and then through time travel transported to that time. Well I might as well have been as pointing the tablet at an image creates short moving clips that appear on screen. You get to experience what life was like through remastered and coloured footage through the tablet. There is I realise a certain nostalgia to this like looking through old photographs. If I take anything from that particular exhibit is the loss over the years of family entertainment in outdoor settings; an event any person of any age could attend together.

I leave the area ready to go home. It was an exciting number of hours and I got to experience how varied and amazing VR can be. Used correctly stories can be told in numerous ways from claymation to CGI TV series to informative documentaries to games. I mourn the loss of these types of events and hope Merton and Digital Drama can continue to unite the community through entertainment because I realise VR is the way forward. It continues to have the power to engage with our imagination while telling a visual, interactive story everyone can understand and that maybe one way to bring us back to those one hundred years ago.

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