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Improving the World through Digital Realms: Unreality within Virtual Reality

Messeri, Lisa. In the Land of the Unreal: Virtual and Other Realities in Los Angeles. Duke UP, 2024. pp. 312.

Over the last couple of years, differentiating between the real and the fabricated has become progressively more difficult, with recent technological innovations often being perceived as central contributors to this collective chaos. That being so, Lisa Messeri, with her book In the Land of the Unreal, attempts to provide informed insights into up-and-coming technology, as well as its potential to construct fantasy. Around 2016, she moved to Los Angeles in an effort to create an overview of its virtual reality community, which, according to her findings, is significantly influenced by the surreal presence of the Hollywood film industry. To properly showcase her research, the author divided this book into three main sections: Fantasy of Place, Fantasy of Being, and Fantasy of Representation. Each part embodies a version of reality she encountered in her interactions with LA's virtual landscapes, simulated experiences, digital storytelling, and their creators. Essentially, Messeri's determination lies in uncovering the possible ways in which new and developing digital systems, primarily VR, could repair this presently broken reality—perhaps even upgrade the future.

The first chapter, "Desert of the Unreal," under the section Fantasy of Place, illustrates how experiencing virtual realms may increase the need for articulating a better physical world. With VR technology advancing rapidly, 'worldbuilding' emerged—not only as a tool for envisioning the future but also as a method for testing innovations in case they become part of reality further on. And so, Messeri recounts her time being a guest at a worldbuilding class in 2018 held by Alex McDowell, a professor at USC School of Cinematic Arts, where his students had presented their final projects, including a "digital rendering of a street corner of the future meant to explore interactions between

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location, technology, ecology, and inhabitants" (47). This functioned as a starting point for imagining possibilities through which 'worldbuilding' could address real-life problems through the digital world. However, it is still uncertain how big a role VR could play in the process of improving Angelenos' collective future, given that the majority of them are skeptical of 'technosolutionism' (50).

"Realities Otherwise" examines the allure surrounding virtual reality experiences, given that they all share a crucial component that elevates the entire fantasy— a façade, "an integral element of Los Angeles's placehood that has been a part of the city since before Disneyland and even before Hollywood" (55). Alongside this overarching constituent, Messeri outlined LA's dominating realities: the hyperreal, the real-and-imagined, and the unreal. All of them assume the function of enhancing one another; conversely, their co-existence is regarded as a 'reality otherwise,' which can proliferate fake information, distort everyday life, and eradicate authenticity. The presence of these realities has been permeating into VR, thereby functioning as a basis for its illusory ambience. Following the observation of realities that construct façade, Messeri includes a claim from the world-famous Italian author, Umberto Eco, that tech, in contrast to nature's unpredictability, can offer desired sightings, be it flora or fauna, with Disneyland's animatronic anthropomorphized animals being a case in point (68). Whilst operating as pure imitation, they provide a guaranteed theatrical performance for the theme park visitors, or better said, an exaggeration of what they would have been presented with in natural settings. On a similar note, Messeri also mentions a proper example of an immersive VR experience in which her friend participated. Within this simulated adventure, he was allowed to meander around Malibu's seaside cliffs and came to be more courageous than usual (69), all because the risk of anything going badly was removed, amplifying the enjoyment. Indeed, it should be noted that when a virtual experience is being developed, the designed environment partakes in building a stronger façade for users' exploration. Messeri ends this chapter by noting that LA is possibly one of the most fertile places to exist for growing VR as a global industry, considering that such a location "has always been about fantasy" (74).

The chapter "Tinseltown and Technology" discusses how VR nearly reached a dead end in 2018, with the increased friction among developers. According to Messeri, the primary reason for that

outcome was the fact that associating technology with entertainment is still uncommon in the minds of the broader public (76). She proposes that a specific vocabulary needs to be invented to connect these two concepts (78) and eventually commercialize their joint potential. To explore this notion further, Messeri applied for a residency at the Technicolor Experience Center, where she witnessed plenty of projects that tried to unite cinematic techniques and tech expertise so that VR could flourish. One of these projects served to imagine human life on Mars, mostly relying on the immersiveness of worldbuilding to envision a possible future for humankind (81). For a long time, TEC was at a standstill, failing to reach success with VR, which ultimately advanced the company's downfall, and most of the staff were terminated in 2019 (98). Messeri, toward the end of this chapter, claims that VR's overall lack of desirability could be ascribed to Hollywood's failing attempts to popularize this recent technology with a movie like Ready Player One (93). Its dystopian feel frames VR as a gadget used for escapism in case humanity finds itself amidst economic and climate crises, not to mention that associating VR headsets with a negative outlook on the future only increases aversion to such a device.

The fourth chapter, "Being and the Other," which introduces the Fantasy of Being, proposes that VR technology can be used for generating empathy through virtual experiences that simulate adverse life circumstances. In this case, VR is utilized to tell stories about the marginalized and the injustices impacting them. Messeri, after engaging with Nonny de la Peña's work, discusses how this technology not only addresses current local and global problems (105) but also emotionally affects those participating in a simulation because it temporarily transports them out of their peaceful existence (106). Following this, the author argues that de la Peña's 'immersive journalism,' which offers a first-person viewpoint on a news event, is a predecessor to the embodied feeling that users experience in VR (114). As a means of translating this type of journalism into the virtual realm, de la Peña debuted Hunger in LA, a film based on a true event and infused with VR storytelling whose intent is to garner empathy for people in serious emergencies (119). Previously mentioned elements like fantasy and façade enable the viewer to sympathize with the unconscious diabetic man, feeling the urge to help him before his condition worsens. Although the experience, in its essence, is meant to provoke a visceral response that brings forth compassion, Messeri warns about the dangers of converting the embodiment of

impoverished positions into a personal narrativization of the privileged (128) as it may appear to be an exercise in narcissism.

The chapter “Special Affect” further considers how VR could be useful as an ‘empathy machine’ in caregiving. For example, a tech company, Embodied Labs, created multiple “labs” (synonymous with VR experiences) in which elderly fictional characters struggle with challenges that usually arise at old age, mainly medical problems (134). These labs are untypical in their scope of representation, meaning that they portray patients with serious illnesses who need support and attention, rather than able-bodied characters that more commonly appear in VR. Furthermore, the author takes a proposition from Michelle Murphy, the author of a 2015 article “Unsettling Care,” that the fantasy of care can be denoted as ‘noninnocent,’which, similarly to the idea of misunderstanding the purpose of embodiment in the fourth chapter, might be perceived as damaging instead of helpful for increasing inequalities between the person depicted in the experience and the one embodying them (137). Messeri, in this case, presents her own terminology for occupying another body, to which she refers as ‘special affect’ that can only be achieved with the 360° camera; this device is a sort of cinematic technology that films in a spherical shape (144), placing the viewer in medias res, as well as creating “the illusion for the viewer of presence in the scene and being present with others” (146-147). Nevertheless, the author emphasizes that the combination of ‘special affect’ and the camera is, as previously observed, solely an illusion since it provides the feeling of embodying someone, in lieu of actually living the life of another (148). This calls into question the effectiveness of the ‘empathy machine’ in manufacturing real growth and togetherness in community settings. Messeri ends the chapter highlighting that the purpose of empathy in VR is to create a better world (153), in accord with raising consciousness about the needs of the elderly.

The sixth chapter, “VR’s Feminine Mystique,” which uncovers the third section, Fantasy of R epresentation, positions female VR creators as particularly important for the industry due to bringing their unique perspectives and striving to improve this technology, separate from masculine influence. There also exists a notion that virtual environments are best suited for women (172) because they display nurturing traits. Messeri then mentions how Jacki Ford Morie, the VP of Education at a VR company Upload, considers that women are naturally endowed to “create better

VR experiences" when, regarding this from an evolutionary standpoint, they were gatherers who had to orient themselves to find the necessary means to survive, which is compulsory in an immersive medium (173). Yet, delineating VR realms as an instrument that enforces gender equality, female representation, and empathy for all, has not realized as intended, but instead propagated Sarah Banet-Weiser's 'popular feminism,' which alienates people who are non-white, gender nonconforming, or both from this seemingly utopian territory (176).

The final chapter, "Making Women's Innovations Work," which continues to reflect upon the "Women in VR" discourse, functions as a conclusory assessment of the entire book, with the author providing her predictions concerning the industry's further advancement as a result of forthcoming female-led projects. For such a new technology that resides between the entertainment business and various social change efforts, VR presented itself as profitable when it "did not need to be structured like traditional tech" (189). Its appeal, above all, is based on the premise that women do not need to conform in this industry, being positioned as a female-oriented space meant to diversify the workforce (191). However, Messeri finds that portraying VR as good technology and industry is problematic because this concept is purely aspirational instead of functional in its mission to form a better world, because VR's structural issues have yet to be resolved (194).

To conclude, Lisa Messeri's In the Land of the Unreal emerges as a comprehensive record of LA's dynamic virtual reality community that continues to inspire world-repairing, technological projects. Her on-site approach of researching these VR ventures allowed her to discover their main purpose and function in authentic contexts, as well as provide unbiased opinions about each invention. The book can be read by both experts in the field and tech enthusiasts eager to educate themselves on the ever-evolving virtual medium, since all chapters are methodically structured and relevant concepts are explained in simple terms. While the author is primarily focused on disclosing perspectives of people working in VR, it would also be interesting to see how ordinary Angelenos perceive this technology, either by conducting a survey or interviews. Additionally, Messeri does not reveal to what extent VR products are sustainable, or, more particularly, how their manufacturing methods impacts natural environment Still, this book is a great vessel for imagining futuristic, reality-bending devices that could help humanity thrive.

Works Cited

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