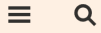




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How virtual reality can help make us more human

Works on show at the London Film Festival shed light on conditions such as ADHD, aphasia and breast cancer



A still from 'Emperor', a virtual reality work about living with aphasia © Marion Burger/Ilan J Cohen



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My daughter sits across from me at the kitchen table, asking me to write down the date. I look down at the page in front of me, where the name of the month is already half-written. D-E-C-E-M. Just a few more letters. I reach out my right hand and am momentarily surprised by its many wrinkles. I trace the letter B, somewhat clumsily, but legibly.

Then, before my eyes, the letter changes shape, resolving into a P. That's not what I wrote. I don't think it is, anyway. My daughter looks up patiently. Let's try again. But then I'm swept away from the scene and plunged into a torrent of memories. My time in the army, half-remembered holidays, quiet moments at the beach with my children. I try to stay in the moment but it's too difficult to hold on. I let go.

This is the beginning of *Emperor*, a virtual reality work about the experience of living with the language disorder aphasia. From next week, it will be shown as part of the extended reality programme at the BFI London Film Festival. It is becoming increasingly common for film festivals to include such high-tech immersive storytelling, from virtual reality, where the external world is sealed off, to mixed reality, where a headset projects imagery over your real

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surroundings. The term extended reality, or XR, has been adopted to group these and other forms together.



'Emperor' invites the user to explore the journey of a man who has lost the ability to speak and the daughter who is struggling to communicate with him © Marion Burger/Ilan J Cohen


Virtual reality has existed in some form for more than 50 years, but artists and technologists still haven't worked out exactly what it does best — nor have they yet come up with a term for VR works to replace the dreaded word “experiences”. But one clear strength that crops up time and again, alongside the potential for total immersion, is the capacity for empathy. VR can place you wholly inside the subjective experience of another person, seeing what they see, hearing what they hear, and so you might be able to relate to their experience more readily and more deeply. The idea that we could use technology to make us more human has a whiff of sci-fi utopianism but, in the case of VR, it holds water.

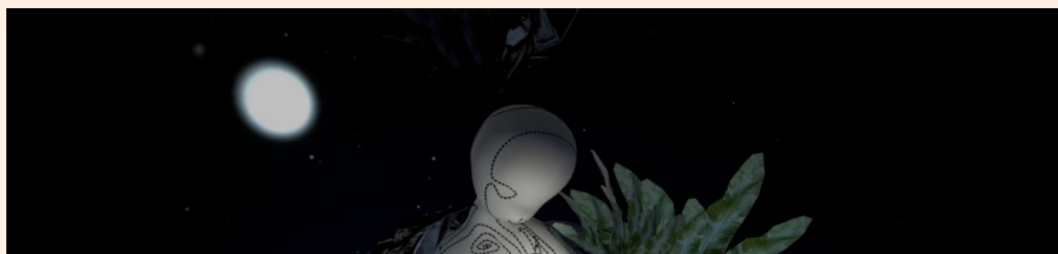
One strand of works in LFF Expanded features stories of living with various health conditions, chronicling experiences of ADHD, aphasia or breast cancer through a blend of personal narratives and impressionistic visuals. These pieces exhibit some of the potential that this technology has to open up radical new pathways for storytelling — and also show that the medium still has some growing to do.

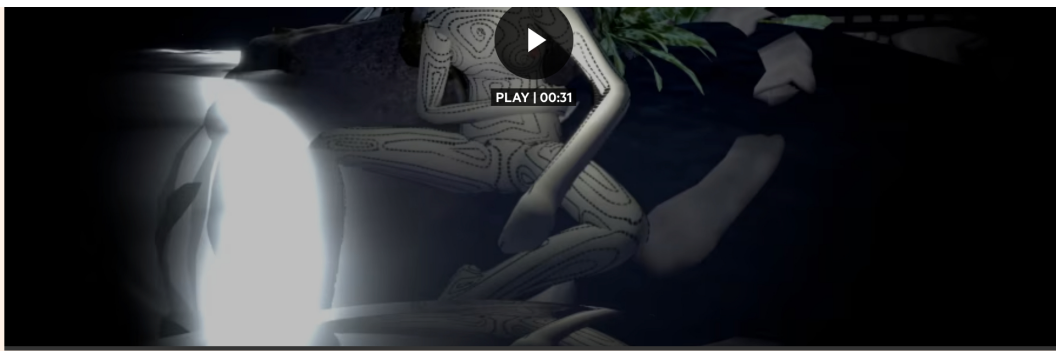
Emperor was created by artist Marion Burger, based on her experiences with her own father's aphasia. It is depicted artfully in monochrome watercolours, each scene unfurling across white space like a half-finished sketch. You see through her father's eyes, both in realistic scenes of trying to relearn language skills, but also while wandering dreamscapes of symbols and memories. For all its painterly ambition, it is in the piece's most intimate, human moments that it resonates most powerfully — when you look down and see wrinkled hands that move as your own, or the humorous story that explains the title *Emperor* (too delightful to spoil).

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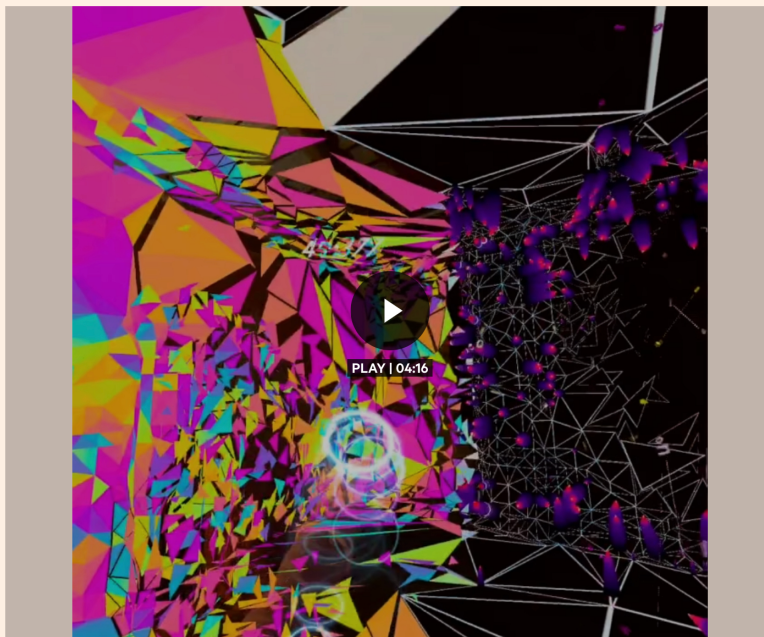




'Mammary Mountain', made with the help of scientists and researchers, tells the stories of patients seeking treatment for breast cancer © Tara Baoth Mooney/Camille Baker/Mafj Alvarez

Part of the power of VR is that it encloses you in a narrative with no danger of distraction, keeping your focus wholly on a person's story. This quality also brings intensity to *Mammary Mountain*, which relates the experiences of breast cancer survivors using psychedelic visuals.

The jewel of the programme, however, is *Impulse*, which won the Immersive Achievement Prize at the Venice Film Festival in September. This work about ADHD is created by the studio Anagram and narrated by Tilda Swinton (who also featured in Anagram's study of psychosis, *Goliath*). Informed by more than 100 hours of interviews, *Impulse* tells the stories of four people living with severe ADHD. Their own words are accompanied by video-game-like 3D animations of scenes from their lives.



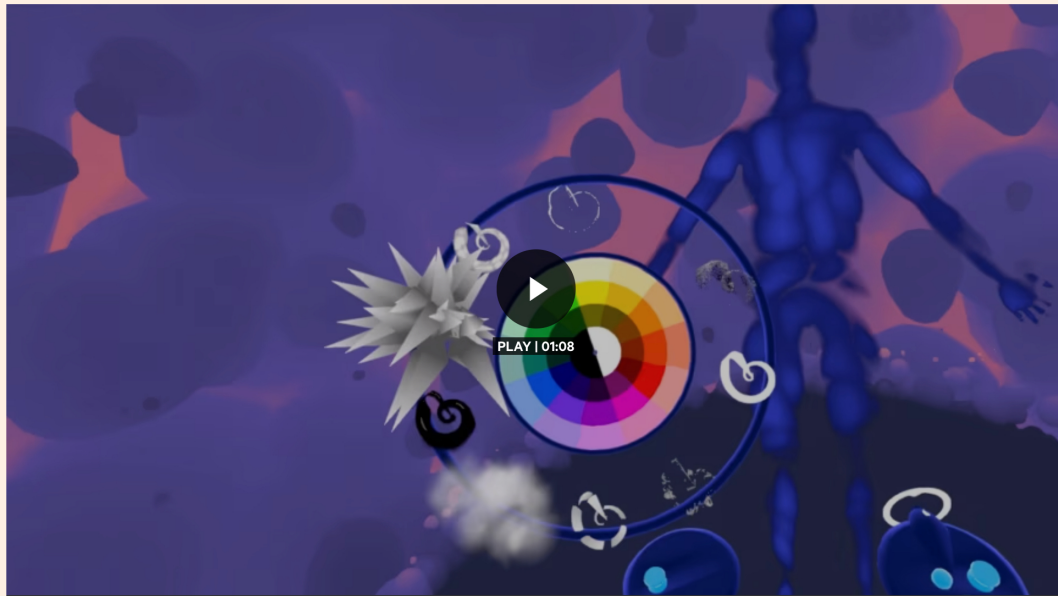
'Impulse', the award-winning game from Anagram, which focuses on the stories of four people to convey the experience of severe ADHD © London

Rather than focusing on diagnoses and medication, the focus is placed on the individuals' stories: their home lives, the way they feel their conditions push them to destructive behaviour and how they learned self-acceptance. Most memorable is a section that tasks you with a game of matching colourful sensory stimuli to giant neurons on the other side of the room. The pace quickens, the neurons rush around chaotically, the pumping techno soundtrack speeds up. You inevitably feel lost, overstimulated, out of control. This, it is suggested, is a little like what it feels like to have ADHD. The effect is powerful.

Participatory moments like these are few and far between. The majority of works are essentially 3D films, only scratching the surface of a VR headset's potential for interactivity. Another piece that bucks this trend is *Soul Paint*, which is based around a single question: *where* are you feeling? You are given a

digital brush that can paint in 3D space and tasked with applying your emotions on to a mannequin representing your own body. In an ingenious reveal, you can then see the way other people have painted feelings on to their own bodies, and hear them describe why they did so. A simple idea executed beautifully, *Soul Paint* encourages audiences not just to be more empathetic to others by revealing the invisible emotions always roiling in us, but also to be more attentive and compassionate to their own feelings.

Soul Paint gestures towards the potential use of XR in medical settings. In psychotherapy, VR can be used to treat phobias and PTSD, allowing patients to confront their fears or traumatic memories in a safe, controlled environment. An experience called *SnowWorld*, which surrounds the user with virtual ice and snow, has been shown to alleviate the pain of severe burn victims during wound treatment.



'Soul Paint' blends art and 3D body mapping to explore connections between movements, emotions and bodily sensations © Sarah Ticho, Niki Smit/Hatsumi&Monobanda

The technology has also been used to train medical professionals. One study provided medical students with a VR experience showing life from an older person's point of view, and found they were later able to empathise better with elderly patients' conditions, such as hearing or vision loss. It's worth noting that all of these applications are early experiments and none have yet been proven effective using long-term studies.

VR can still feel like a medium in its infancy. The headsets are clunky, the graphics dated, the interactive components often unambitious. In the future we will no doubt see greater heights of immersive, empathetic and embodied storytelling from extended reality works. But it is already showing its promise — and some flashes of genuine brilliance.

LFF Expanded, October 11-27, bfi.org.uk

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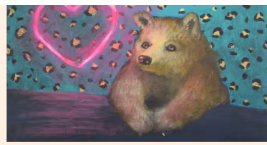
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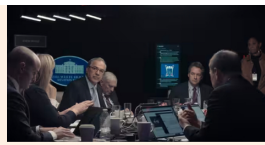
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