

VR for Diversity

A Virtual Museum Exhibition about LGBTIQ+

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ABSTRACT

This interactive virtual museum provides insights into LGBTIQ+ issues by presenting the history and utilization of pride flags and different legal situations worldwide and by pointing out the meaning of identity markers and their interconnectedness. This is complemented with an intimate engagement through photography, personal narratives from members of the LGBTIQ+ community and a fully immersive pride parade, allowing users to engage and learn with various stylistic, factual and fun exhibitions.

KEYWORDS

Virtual Reality, diversity, LGBTIQ+, interaction, gender

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1 INTRODUCTION

VR for Diversity is a two-year research project that is conducted at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, focusing on the interactive possibilities of virtual reality, while simultaneously intended to inform the user about issues of diversity [1]. For this particular sub-project, students from the Master Digital Design program [2] were asked to create a virtual reality experience relating to LGBTIQ+ issues. Their assignment was to present a project that would be educational, would connect to the *VR for Diversity* goals and would appeal to audiences in order to spread awareness about diversity specifically in relation to LGBTIQ+ topics.

With this in mind, the VR experience that is presented here aims to raise awareness and start conversations about the LGBTIQ+ community. While in certain areas of the world discussions of

LGBTIQ+ people and identities have been popularized in recent years, in other areas these topics are not necessarily as accessible for the average person. Because of this, the need to create a VR experience that would help users engage in positive narratives from real people and learn more about what it means to be LGBTIQ+ around the world became even more relevant.

Before working out the concept, research on the topic of LGBTIQ+ identities (as all identities engage in the aforementioned categories) and an investigation into various current historical, international and individual narratives was conducted [3]. Further research focused on central themes, facts and figures that would be educational and spread awareness of the LGBTIQ+ community at large for eventual users.

Ultimately the goal was to combine storytelling with virtual reality technology, in order to display both facts and narratives that users could interact with and learn from. As it was noted that reliable information on identity formation in terms of narrative was difficult to find and hard to interpret (presumably due to both the overwhelming amount of personal narratives online and the continued debate against LGBTIQ+ identities worldwide), the concept of the “Genderbread Person” [4] was used as an introduction to open the discussion of sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression, and the interconnectedness of these concepts. Additional interviews were added with members of the university’s LGBTIQ+ network (HvA Pride), as well as an LGBTIQ+ themed photo-exhibition, to engage with an artistic approach to understanding themes faced by the LGBTIQ+ community. Creating an experience in this way would engage viewers in an empathic manner and allow them to engage with various narratives where they may not have other opportunities to do so. Finally, an additional aim was to make it a fun and entertaining experience, which would potentially help to engage various age groups, people with differing interest-fields, and generally to appeal to users regardless of their knowledge or specific interests.

2 THE VIRTUAL EXHIBITION

This experience combines elements of a physical museum with virtual reality technology, so that users can walk through a museum-like space and engage with various exhibitions that have been created. Visitors can move throughout the space at will, and have freedom to engage with whatever exhibition catches their eye. In doing so, users are given the opportunity to choose and engage in

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Figure 1: The Genderbread Person

their own way and in their own time, much like a ‘real’ museum. Throughout the experience there is also an audio guide, which was added after a discussion of accessibility for those who may not be able to read text in VR next to each exhibit. This was done as while some legibility issues can be disability-related, there are also many people who simply struggle to read in VR, which can be related to the quality of the headset and accessibility to strong enough technology to provide necessary detail. By doing this, every user would be able to engage with every exhibit.

2.1 The Genderbread Person

A central exhibit in the museum is a virtual version of the aforementioned Genderbread Person. This concept is often used by Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SoGi) educators to create a basic understanding of the underlying factors that make up a gender- and sexuality-related identity and it is also used to show the variability both within and outside of the LGBTQ+ community. Upon entering the virtual museum, the user encounters a gingerbread-like character standing in a room with arrows pointing to ‘sex’ ‘attraction’ and a large marking to show ‘expression’ as the outside of the gender bread person. On an adjacent wall, other information is displayed in relation to masculinity & femininity, romantic attraction and sexual attraction. These are displayed on multiple continuums, so as to show that these are not mutually exclusive and can be variable (e.g. feeling sexual attraction to feminine and masculine individuals, as opposed to the common either-or misconception of sexual attraction). The gender bread person is considered a fun and interactive way to learn more about gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation.

2.2 Pride flags

While walking through hallways between exhibits, various pride flags are displayed, as well as information about them. This includes which part of the community they represent, which year the flags were created, and some additional facts for users who may be further interested in the various flags. Pride flags have existed since 1978 starting with the original rainbow flag to represent the entirety of the LGBTQ+ community, however over time various groups have created their own as well. By creating this in a hallway users are welcomed to see flags they may recognize (or perhaps not recognize) and engage with a physical representation of various LGBTQ+ identities. By doing so, not only the flags themselves, but the various identities they represent are being displayed for users to learn more about. While many users may know about more commonly represented identities such as gay, lesbian or bisexual, this is an opportunity to display identities and have users engage with them that are less often mentioned in the public sphere. By doing so, users not only engage with parts of history, or creative discussions of flag design, but are also gently guided into interest and intrigue about identities such as pansexuality, gender fluid or intersex.

2.3 Same-sex marriage world map

Another exhibit displays a map of the world, and shows the countries in which same-sex marriage has been legalized, lit up in rainbow colors. Beside it are the names of the countries that have currently legalized same-sex marriage, including a few that have been legalized recently (e.g. Costa Rica in 2020). Showing this world map not only engages users in showcasing how much of the world is accepting of these marriages, but also shows where there is still



Figure 2: The same-sex marriage world map

not acceptance globally in terms of marriage equality. One of the benefits of this type of map is that it can always be added to in time, as hopefully the world continues to grow in its acceptance of LGBTIQ+ people and their (legally recognized) relationships.

Showing this graphically can be a learning point for both positive and negative information and by doing so users are asked to engage in a global outlook on the situation for LGBTIQ+ people. Users may also engage more readily in activism and in conversation having learned more about the global situation. As one student said, “As you can see, we still have a while to go, but we’re getting there.” That appears to be the heart of the sentiment with this exhibit, and engages directly with the aims of opening conversations and raising awareness for diversity goals.

2.4 University Pride Network

Another hallway between exhibits makes use of the university’s Pride network campaign posters, showing various people within the university itself who either identify as part of the LGBTIQ+ community, or consider themselves allies. In creating the experience, this group was interviewed in an effort to know more about the experience of LGBTIQ+ people, both within the university and in general. The aims of these interviews were to highlight the Pride community’s stories, projects and campaigns. To do so, there is an additional exhibit in a room where users can view video-audio interviews of various members of the community, to gain a better understanding by using first-person narratives.

2.5 Photo-exhibition

Another exhibit was created to showcase German photographer Wolfgang Tilmans [4] most influential works in a VR space. This is

the first time this has been done with his work, and adds an element of artistic influence, as well as engaging with the artistic outputs of the LGBTIQ+ community, as opposed to only facts and figures. By doing so, this part of the museum allows users to engage in a different way to the LGBTIQ+ community, and shows parts of LGBTIQ+ life beyond the laws, regulations, or factual information used to define the community itself.

2.6 Virtual Pride parade

Another exhibit created was a virtual Pride Experience room (in relation to the Gay Pride parade popular in Amsterdam, where the university is located). This room models the Amsterdam canals in virtual reality, during a live pride parade in real time. Users have a 360-degree field of view, and are able to immerse themselves in a virtual version of the Pride Parades that are held annually in Amsterdam, and around the world. This engages users not only due to the intense immersiveness, but also engages users with the notion of fun, which allows users to see an entertaining element of LGBTIQ+ life. Engaging with the Pride Parade is something that is also done in ‘real’ life, and by creating a virtual version this experience allows significantly more users to do so as well, as not all countries allow Pride Parades and not all users may be able to attend for various reasons. Commonly Pride Parades are attended not only by LGBTIQ+ people, but by allies, family and friends. These events are created to spread awareness of LGBTIQ+ issues but are also there to engage the community at large, to celebrate life and to spend time together, LGBTIQ+ and otherwise. By creating a virtual version, this engaging and bright element of the LGBTIQ+ community is highlighted as a museum exhibition. Additionally, while Pride Parades themselves may be able to offer



Figure 3: The Virtual Pride parade

a similar experience, ‘real’ museums cannot. This increases the importance on this interactive virtual museum and its opportunities for engagement, education, and fun.

3 CONCLUSIONS

This interactive virtual museum provides insights into LGBTQ+ issues by presenting the history and utilization of pride flags and different legal situations worldwide and by pointing out the meaning of identity markers and their interconnectedness. This is complemented with an intimate engagement through photography, personal narratives from members of the LGBTQ+ community and a fully immersive pride parade, allowing users to engage and learn with various stylistic, factual and fun exhibitions. Ultimately, the goal of this experience is to provide accessibility to the topic and the museum itself, flexibility in that the museum itself can be

expanded easily and changed over time (such as with the same-sex marriage map as discussed previously), and educational as it engages in various topics that may spark users to continue to learn about LGBTQ+ topics.

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