

Increased success a 'virtual' certainty for rugby players (w/ Video)

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Rugby players worldwide could benefit from a new virtual reality training programme created at Queen's University Belfast. Team members from Ulster Rugby have been working with researchers in the School of Psychology at Queen's on a range of virtual training scenarios that test expert players' perceptual skills.

Lead researcher in the project is Dr Cathy Craig, a Senior Lecturer in [Visual Perception](#) who has previously collaborated with Adidas and top professional world class goal-keepers' to study perception of curved free-kicks in football. She said: "Immersing players in an interactive [virtual reality](#) provides an exciting new way of exploring and understanding human behaviour.

"The advantages of this technology are that unlike playing a video game on a normal desktop computer, the rugby player or athlete is totally immersed in a realistic simulated environment. By presenting stereoscopic images in a head mounted display and tracking head movements, the user's viewpoint is automatically updated giving a 360 degree virtual experience. This means that the user becomes totally absorbed in their virtual environment encouraging them to interact as they would in the real world."

The players are fitted with a 'backpack' of sensors and don a helmet-like visor known as a head mounted display through which a series of 360 degree virtual scenarios are displayed.

Also involved in the project are PhD students Gareth Watson from Queen's and Sébastien Brault from the M2S lab, University of Rennes 2. Gareth Watson added: "Our research is concerned with identifying the key events that influence decisions made by players on the pitch. By controlling the events presented to the players, we can see how the visual information available to the participants at any moment in time influences the player's decision about when and how to act". For the researchers this type of research provides valuable insight into expertise and how visual information is used in the decision making process.

So far Ulster rugby players have taken part in two studies. Jeremy Davidson, Forwards' Coach with Ulster Rugby said: "Working alongside the researchers in Psychology at Queen's has provided us with a very useful visual coaching tool that can be used to develop a player's peripheral vision. This is a vital aspect of a player's game and we are looking forward to it improving decision making for our players in a real match setting."

Source: Queen's University Belfast

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