

Up close and personal—virtual reality can be an instrument for social change

April 27 2016, by Gonzalo N Villanueva, University Of Melbourne



Virtual reality can trigger emotions that text can't convey. Credit: Sergey Galyonkin/Flickr, CC BY-SA

Virtual reality (VR) has arrived. It has already been described as "[revolutionary](#)" and the "[next big thing](#)" in technology.

Its applications extend beyond entertainment and games to include education, art and a range of other innovative uses.

But VR also has the potential to promote [social change](#).

From words to pictures

There is a reason we say "a picture is worth a thousand words". Images can communicate complex ideas and provoke emotions more effectively than descriptions.

For example, take [Aduc Barec's](#) story: she was compelled to leave Sudan in the early 1990s because of the [civil war](#). Her family walked for a month before reaching Ethiopia, where they lived in limbo until they settled in a refugee camp for five years. Aduc and her family were later resettled in Australia.

When we read her story, and those of other refugees, it is often difficult to imagine and understand their experiences.

Here's another example. Imagine reading for the first time [reports from the animal rights group PETA](#) (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) about the plight of pigs in factory farms. You would read that, from a young age, piglets are physically mutilated without painkillers, that for most of their lives they are confined indoors in a crowded pen, and that their ultimate fate is the abattoir, where they are stunned and slaughtered.

For some, the details in these examples are provocative enough. But others may find it difficult to empathise and understand when simply reading the descriptions on their own.

Perhaps watching a video of the plight of refugees or that of pigs in factory farms may stimulate greater intellectual and emotional reactions?

Be warned, these videos contain some graphic images.

Images of human and animal suffering can elicit shock, horror, outrage, pity and compassion. Social justice campaigners have known about the power of imagery for some time, which is why it is central to their campaigns.

Up close and personal

So how does VR compare? Social justice campaigners, like [animal rights](#) activists, are developing virtual experiences and taking them to the physical world.

Since 2014, PETA has exhibited [I, Chicken](#) across hundreds of college campuses and universities in the United States and Australia.

In the three-minute simulation, participants embody a virtual chicken and experience her life, from roaming in a green pasture to then being captured and transported to a slaughterhouse.

During the first two months of the US tour, [students were polled as they exited](#). At one college, participants reported feeling more empathy with the plight of a chicken: "It didn't feel like a video game anymore at the end."

Another said:

[...] after they put you in the slaughterhouse, I actually felt kind of afraid. I don't know why. I knew it was a game, or whatever, but I guess my body reacted internally as like [I was] about to get killed. After the game, I felt that, yeah, chickens have emotions, they're like humans, they feel pain.



U.S. college students get a feel for what it's like to be a battery hen. Credit: PETA

PETA found that 30% of participants felt "more conflicted" about eating chickens after the three-minute simulation. According to PETA, participants responded more positively as compared to other stalls where people read a leaflet or watched a video.

Tool for social change

[Researchers](#) have also observed this difference. They have discovered that immersive virtual environments allow us to "see, hear, and feel digital stimuli" as if we were in the real world.

In two studies, researchers compared the effects of cutting down a virtual tree against reading a print description or watching a video of the same process. They found that those immersed in [virtual reality](#) had

greater behavioural changes and consumed 20% less paper than non-VR participants in the follow-up experiment.

Why not explore the VR experience for yourself? If you have a VR headset, or [Google Cardboard](#), you can discover the [lives of pigs in factory farms](#) (sorry iPhone users, the Apple YouTube app still does not have a VR function but you can still try the 2D experience).

Android users can also download [iChicken](#).

Google Cardboard users can also download [Vrse](#) or [NYT VR](#) and explore "The Displaced" for the moving stories of three children who have been displaced by war and conflict.

VR may be the next big thing in the entertainment industry, but I am more excited about the possibilities it has for stimulating social and political transformations. By itself, it won't change the world, but it might be a powerful tool we can use for social change.

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