

# Virtual Reality puts viewer in the movie at Cannes

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Actor Ethan Hawke narrates the six-minute VR animated film "Invasion", which was screened in Cannes on Monday

What if you could both watch a film and be a character in it: perhaps an animated bunny fighting off inept aliens or a humanoid robot struggling with its identity?

Virtual Reality (VR)—which is revolutionising everything from gaming

to surgery and porn—is doing this so successfully that it secured a special slot at the world's premier film festival in Cannes this year where dozens of VR movies are being shown.

Filmmakers say the technology is moving so fast they can barely keep up. They are having to fashion homemade cameras and figure out how to make their work accessible to a wider public.

"It is like right at the beginning of film, but it is going to move very, very quickly," said Vincent Leclercq of France's National Centre of Cinematography.

The technology has drawn big names like "Madagascar" director Eric Darnell teaming up with actor Ethan Hawke who narrates the six-minute VR animated film "Invasion", which was screened in Cannes on Monday.

Viewers find themselves standing in the animated universe of a white fluffy rabbit which manages to outwit two incompetent aliens who have come to take over the world.

Darnell told AFP the idea came from the original [science fiction](#) alien invasion classic "War of the Worlds" where the extraterrestrials struck him as "bumbling and not that scary".

"The thing that makes it really different from cinema is that ... it really makes for a completely different experience for the viewer to have that bunny come up and look you in the eye and acknowledge your presence."

As he speaks laughter breaks out as a woman nearby testing the film with a headset on lifts up her arms and tries to walk off while connected to a laptop.

When the viewers look down they see they have a rabbit's body, and Darnell said the reaction is common.

"It is really kind of magical," he said.

And animation was the perfect match for Virtual Reality.

"We all have pretty high expectations for reality, so you start to see pixels and all the things that make it not real. But with animation you just suspend your disbelief," Darnell said.

## **Philip K. Dick robot**

Another film screened in Cannes was the French production "I, Philip", based on a true story around science fiction author Philip K. Dick whose work inspired "Blade Runner" and "Minority Report".

In homage to the author who died in 1982, scientists in 2005 used his face on an Artificial Intelligence robot who was programmed with past interviews with the author and could hold a conversation as him.

But in a science fiction-like twist that Dick could have written, the robot head disappeared after being left on an aircraft in 2006, never to be seen again.

In the 14-minute VR film, the viewer is the robot trying to making sense of its reality as it is switched on to endure interviews with awed humans.

There are also flashbacks to human memories and in one disturbing scene the viewer is Philip, lying in a hospital bed while a woman holds his hand crying.

Producer Antoine Cayrol told AFP that one of the biggest challenges in

VR films was scriptwriting, which required "a little manipulation".

"Because you are working in 360 degrees the real difficulty when it comes to writing is making the viewer look where you want him to look.

This is done with simple tricks like a slamming door in the background making you turn around, or an arm movement directing the viewer's eye.

He said the team at his Okio film studio had dancers help them with movement choreography and sound engineers to help with writing.

"The other challenge is that ... we must build the camera. It is very artisanal, we take cameras and stick them back to back," he said.

"Filming 'I, Philip', we had a bag of ice on the camera the entire time," to prevent it from overheating.

## **Still learning**

These short VR films are available in application stores, but Cayrol said that access to the films was "the biggest challenge we face right now."

High-end VR headsets like the Oculus Rift or HTC Vive still cost hundreds of euros.

And Cayrol admits that the cheaper models like the Samsung Gear which he used to show his film in Cannes, do not have an ideal image quality.

The world's first specialised VR cinema opened in Amsterdam last month and Leclercq of the French cinematic body said plans were under way to build one in Paris.

"We are in this rather particular phase where creation is moving faster than distribution," he said.

VR [films](#) are around 10 minutes long and Darnell said it was too soon to do a feature-length movie.

"VR is really hard, we don't know the language yet, we are all learning," he said.

"I am sure in a few years we will look back at these times when we have these big boxes on our faces and we will laugh at those funny old days of VR.

"I am sure you won't have to wear a headset at all. Maybe it will just be a pair of glasses—the new technology is moving so quickly."

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