

Virtual Reality Sessions at Watershed – Research, methods and implementation

Background

Watershed Producer, Vanessa Bellaar Spruijt shares a rough guide to audience experience design, research methods and technical set up for staging VR as a cultural event. Vanessa was the lead producer for [VR Sessions](#) at Watershed in June 2017, and worked on the delivery and the audience experience design of the programme in collaboration with VR curator [Catherine Allen](#).

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Publicity

We first spoke to our communications department with a skeleton plan in order to find out what approach to take with our existing audiences for a new event like this. At this stage we already knew which room we were going to use, which was partly a decision driven by cost, but also by our vision that it had to be a private space that could be easy to control. This also determined our capacity, as we measured that six people would be able to comfortably sit in the room with enough space around them and the kit (where appropriate). Speaking to our communications department first was a crucial step

for determining the finer detail of our events, notably who the audience would be, optimum times to run the events, how to communicate the offer and manage expectations as well as pricing.

In communicating the season, we made an explicit decision to foreground the story rather than the technology, as you can see [here](#). Our communications team treated each VR experience as they would something from our creative programme - a film or event or talk. The copy focused on the story each VR piece was trying to tell, how audiences would feel doing it, and its aesthetic qualities. We positioned the whole season as an experiment (we know that Watershed's audiences are incredibly experimental and will try new stuff), emphasised that feedback was incredibly important, and that each experience showcased a different part of VR's artistic potential.

We were also cautious that it had to be accessible for people who had never experienced VR before and there may be questions. Apart from that our operations team highlighted that due to the unfamiliarity of the medium and the lack of standard practice, unlike cinema, we needed to provide a guide and FAQ section. The headset manufacturers, Oculus, have very strict [health & safety guidelines](#) for users which we tailored to make them more audience friendly.

We created a clear Guidelines and FAQs section [here](#) which was really useful. Notably the age restriction is very interesting (13+) and in place due to the fact that there is little research available on the impact of use on children.

We try to talk about events before they are on sale (we have a very successful [Coming Soon](#) section on the website to help with this - it's a way for people to register their interest in advance of a season or event going live) and timed the Coming Soon announcement to coincide with [VR World Congress](#), a big VR conference held in Bristol. As a result we got a very large, engaged audience who signed up in advance of Sessions going on sale.

Once on sale, our comms team communicated the season through our usual channels (in cinema advertising, online ads, social media, email campaigns, screens in the building, etc) and, like we would a film, focused on the individual audiences for each event as well as the season as whole. For example, targeting epileptic interest groups (Dancing With Myself) and dance groups (Through You). We knew the tech audience would be covered via our usual channels so we



made a focus for the season on targeting young people - those under 30 - in particular.

Venue

A private function room with a main entrance and a 'back stage' entrance, controllable lighting and shutters for the windows.

Set up

- 3x small round tables
- 6x comfortable swivel chairs
- Gaffa tape markers between the table and the chair to indicate a comfort zone
- Dimmed, atmospheric lighting
- Trestle table with a table cloth behind a screen/room divider for charging phones, storing spare kit, any documentation and pens.
- Spare table in the room with a table cloth, to store kit boxes under + leave antiseptic wipes on display.

Equipment

We hired kit from [Virtually Mine Ltd](#)

6x Gear VR headsets + headphones

12x Samsung Galaxy S6 (so you can rotate) + fast charging cables & blocks

6x Oculus Rift headsets (incl. clickers)

6x VR PCs

6x wireless mice and keyboards

6x screens

We provided:

Extension leads and trunking for the PC cables

Disinfectant wipes

Batteries for the wireless devices

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TIP: Use wired mice and keyboards as they are much more reliable. The Bluetooth didn't always work on the wireless devices.

Please allow at least four days for testing, including a proper tech rehearsal with at least 3x back to back slots for each type of headset. Depending on the VR experiences, there are different set up types and this is not always straightforward. Notably, any app experiences not on the Oculus store that might need to integrate device ID's at app level would need extra attention at the kit hire level.

Hosting

We identified that two ushers are needed to make the experience comfortable and run to schedule efficiently, since the session rota was back to back in most cases.

For the sake of this document we will call them host usher and usher to differentiate their roles.

The key to having a good VR experience is to create a calm and welcoming environment where people feel looked after, without being fussed over. As the medium will become more familiar over time, some of the finer detail around how to use the tech may not need to be explained anymore.

Usher responsibilities:

- Meet audience by door 10 minutes prior to slot start (so leave the room 10 minutes before the session ends). Keep an eye on the time. Door should be closed from 2 mins into session.
- Meeting and greeting and managing expectations about the wait
- Doors won't open until the host usher has knocked on it to alert usher that the room is ready. Doors will open either just when the slot is supposed to start or when a minimum of four people have arrived and the room is ready.
- Usher will sign people off and guide people in, telling them that they can leave their belongings in a designated space in the room.

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- Once everyone has arrived or the slot time has passed, the door will be locked.

Tasks at the end of each experience:

Oculus Rift experiences

- (in our case) Invite people to join the researchers for an informal chat and drink, in case people would like to share their experience.
- Wipe lenses & headset + headphones
- Detangle cables
- Reset chair
- Reset experience on the computer

Gear VR experiences

- (in our case) Invite people to join the researchers for an informal chat and drink, in case people would like to share their experience.
- Ensure phones are charged
- Headsets and phone screens clean (de-greased) and earphones wiped.
- Headphones securely fitted in phones ready to use.
- Swap phones every two sessions and put on charge + get the experience lined up
- Reset chairs

Host usher responsibilities and script when using Oculus Rift:

- When people start entering, guide them in pairs to a seat and ask them to leave their bags or coats in a dedicated area away from their chair.
- Brief pairs with the following guidance (in own words) (usher can do this too if necessary):

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- There is a bit of tape on the floor, please don't move your feet over it.
- We will look after your belongings during the experience.
- Please take a good look at the headset and have a play with the straps. Please don't put it on until asked to do so.
- We will stay in the room the entire time to look after you and nobody will be taking photographs or filming you.
- (In case of glasses wearers) ask them whether they can focus on their hand in front of face and advise + loosen the straps for them.

- Address the group as a whole with a 'script', but in a hosting manner. Read the room and adapt accordingly.

- Welcome to our [insert venue details]
- As with all performances at Watershed we would like to make you aware of a couple of things:
 - If the fire alarm goes off, please don't rip the headset off your head, we will put a hand on your shoulder to prompt you and guide you out of the building.
 - The nearest toilets are [insert venue details]

- In a moment, you will be asked to put on your headsets, but first we would like to make you aware of a couple of things:

- This experience will last xxx minutes.

- If you want our attention for any reason during the experience, please raise your hand.

- If you want to stop the experience for any reason, please close your eyes and raise your hand. One of us will be with you immediately.

- Bear in mind that we cannot pause the experience, so If you just want a break from the visuals, it is best to close your eyes rather than take the headset off as it can be disorienting.

- Please remain seated for the entire time you are wearing the headset, even though the experience might be finished. You can take the headset off as soon as the credits have finished, then please wait for everyone else.

- When you first put your headset on, don't feel that you have to look everywhere all the time. VR is best experienced when you let it wash



over you, like in real life. You can swivel the chair, but please don't go all the way round.

- A very small percentage of people might feel nauseous. The virtual worlds that you will be experiencing tonight do not contain any of the elements that typically cause motion sickness such as sudden movements or low quality graphics. (adapt if your experience has fast moving graphics etc.)

- Please put on your headsets and adjust the straps, If you need assistance, please raise your hand.

- When your headset is comfortable, look around and find [whatever the play button of the experience is]. Look at it for a few seconds and your experience will start. You should have audio.

Host usher responsibilities and script when using Gear VR headsets:

- When people start entering, guide them in pairs to a seat and ask them to leave their bags or coats in a dedicated area away from their chair.

- Brief pairs with the following guidance (in own words):

- There is a bit of tape on the floor, please don't move your feet over it.
- We will look after your belongings during the experience.
- We will stay in the room the entire time to look after you and nobody will be taking photographs or filming you.
- (In case of glasses wearers) ask them whether they can focus on their hand in front of face and advise + loosen the straps for them.

- Address the group as a whole with a 'script', but in a hosting manner. Read the room and adapt accordingly.

- Welcome to our [insert venue details]
- As with all performances at Watershed we would like to make you aware of a couple of things:

• If the fire alarm goes off, please don't rip the headset off your head, we will put a hand on your shoulder to prompt you and guide you out of the building.



- The nearest toilets are [insert venue details]
- In a moment, you will be asked to put on your headsets, but first we would like to make you aware of a couple of things:
 - This experience will last xxx minutes.
 - If you want our attention for any reason during the experience, please raise your hand.
 - If you want to stop the experience for any reason, please close your eyes and raise your hand. One of us will be with you immediately.
 - Bear in mind that we cannot pause the experience, so If you just want a break from the visuals, it is best to close your eyes rather than take the headset off as it can be disorienting.
 - Please remain seated for the entire time you are wearing the headset, even though the experience might be finished. You can take the headset off as soon as the credits have finished, then please wait for everyone else.
 - When you first put your headset on, don't feel that you have to look everywhere all the time. VR is best experienced when you let it wash over you, like in real life. You can swivel the chair, but please don't go all the way round.
 - A very small percentage of people might feel nauseous. The virtual worlds that you will be experiencing tonight do not contain any of the elements that typically cause motion sickness such as sudden movements or low quality graphics. (adapt if your experience has fast moving graphics etc.)
 - Please take the headset into your hands without touching the buttons on the side and adjust the straps. Place the headset over your eyes first and then pull it across your head. We will now come round and help you focus and get comfortable.

Both ushers go round and assist individuals:

- Explain the positioning of the focus setting & raise their left hand and touch their finger to the nodule. Ask them to move to the best possible focus for them.



- Ask them to reach out their hands and to place them on the table with their palms facing up. Place the headphones in their hands, guide them to put them on.
- Place their right hand on the volume setting and advise this can adjust the noise level as required.
- Stand behind them, and ask whether they are ready. Then place your left hand on the left side of the goggles and press play with your right hand.

Director Q&As

Watershed often offer director Q&As as part of the cinema programme, which are very popular. We introduced director Q&A's on two of the sessions in our season and they were well attended. They were presented in a more informal manner and we used the same room, but added beanbags and two chairs for the chair and the interviewee. Sound was not amplified.

Research

Set up:

A booked table in the bar or other suitable space where people can chat and have a drink

2x lead researchers + a note taker using a laptop

A5 questionnaires

Approach:

The lead researchers welcome the audience members who have agreed to have a 15 – 25 mins chat and start with opening question 'How was it for you?' or 'what did you think?'

Discussion would then quickly ensue and both researchers would guide it back to relevant areas where appropriate with a range of other questions such as 'how did this fit into your evening?', 'what did

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you think of the set up', 'what did you expect', 'what motivated you to come?'

The discussion would then be wrapped and people are asked whether they want to fill in a short A5 questionnaire at the table. The questionnaire had the following questions ranging from yes or no, multiple choice or sliding scale:

Date, slot, name, gender (optional)

- 1) Have you tried VR before? (yes, no)
- 2) What was your motivation for choosing today's session? (content, technology, both)
- 3) How much would you expect to pay for this experience? (£0 - £10+)
- 4) How comfortable did you feel during the experience (not at all – extremely)
 - 4.1) Is there anything that could have improved your experience?
- 5) Did you feel self-conscious during the experience? (not at all – extremely)
- 6) Would you like to see more VR programmed at Watershed (yes, no)

Tip: Even if you are not conducting research as part of your VR experiences, audiences have expressed that they really value being able to chat about their experience afterwards. People viewed the discussion as an extension to the VR experience and it added value for many of our audience members.

Budget breakdown (incl VAT)

Approximate costs, notwithstanding company overheads, producer time, comms, finance etc:

	Cost
Venue hire	£300 (in kind)
Equipment hire	£4000

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Props for one of the VR experiences	£30
Materials (wipes, batteries etc)	£15
People including curation, researchers and ushers (incl. NI)	£4530
Tech support	£250
Travel & accommodation for VR directors	£350
Total	£9475

VR Sessions timetable

Virtual Reality sessions ran from Wednesday 13 June through to Saturday 17 June

Wednesday 13 June

Easter Rising: Voice of a Rebel – 12 mins

16.00 – 22.00 (30 min slots)

10x slots for VR (7x with post-discussions) 2x Producer's Q&A

Thursday 14 June

Through You – 14 mins

16.00 – 22.00 (30 min slots)

11x slots for VR (8x with post-discussions)

Friday 15 June

Dancing With Myself – 16 mins

18.00 – 22.00 (30 min slots)

8x slots for VR with post-discussion

Saturday 16 June

Natural Reality 2:1 – 6 mins

10.00 – 22.00 (30 min slots)

14x slots for VR (7x with post-discussions) 2x Director's Q&A

Our system of selling tickets and encouraging pre-booking for all slots, coupled with the careful training and deployment of two ushers, meant that sessions ran like clockwork and we could fit in a high volume of audience experiences.

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Related reading:

[Virtual Reality Sessions: Lessons learnt for the cultural cinema sector](#)
by Catherine Allen

[Virtually Useful](#) - a series of short reads from Studio Managing
Producer, Verity McIntosh aimed at creatives with an interest in VR

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