

Watch this space: a postcard from virtual reality. *I'm sitting on a beach, eavesdropping on a young couple. If I turn my head I can hear their voices more clearly over the sound of the surf. Are they going to move in together? Or break up? Another wave rolls in, right up to my feet. My vision fades to black. I take the headset off and the view is replaced by one of Hollywood at night, seen from the Soho House balcony. I'm grinning involuntarily.*

William
Fowler

So what first interested you in VR?' says the man who co-created this experience, Samir Mallal. Also a film and ad director, he made this virtual reality piece with Aron Hjartarson of Framestore. Its title, *New Wave*, is a nod to the revolutionary techniques of the French new wave, staking a place for this new kind of storytelling in the history of cinema.

Virtual reality is having its *Breathless* moment. For those who remember feeling simultaneously confused and unwell in polygonal environments in the 90s, let me assure you that this time it's different. For one, the hardware has improved dramatically. The new VR headsets, like the one I was using, make use of the fast processor and HD screen of a mobile phone, plugged into a device containing two slightly convex lenses. The phone's accelerometer matches the visual track to the movements of your head to simulate a 360 panorama. The near-ubiquity of this technology also



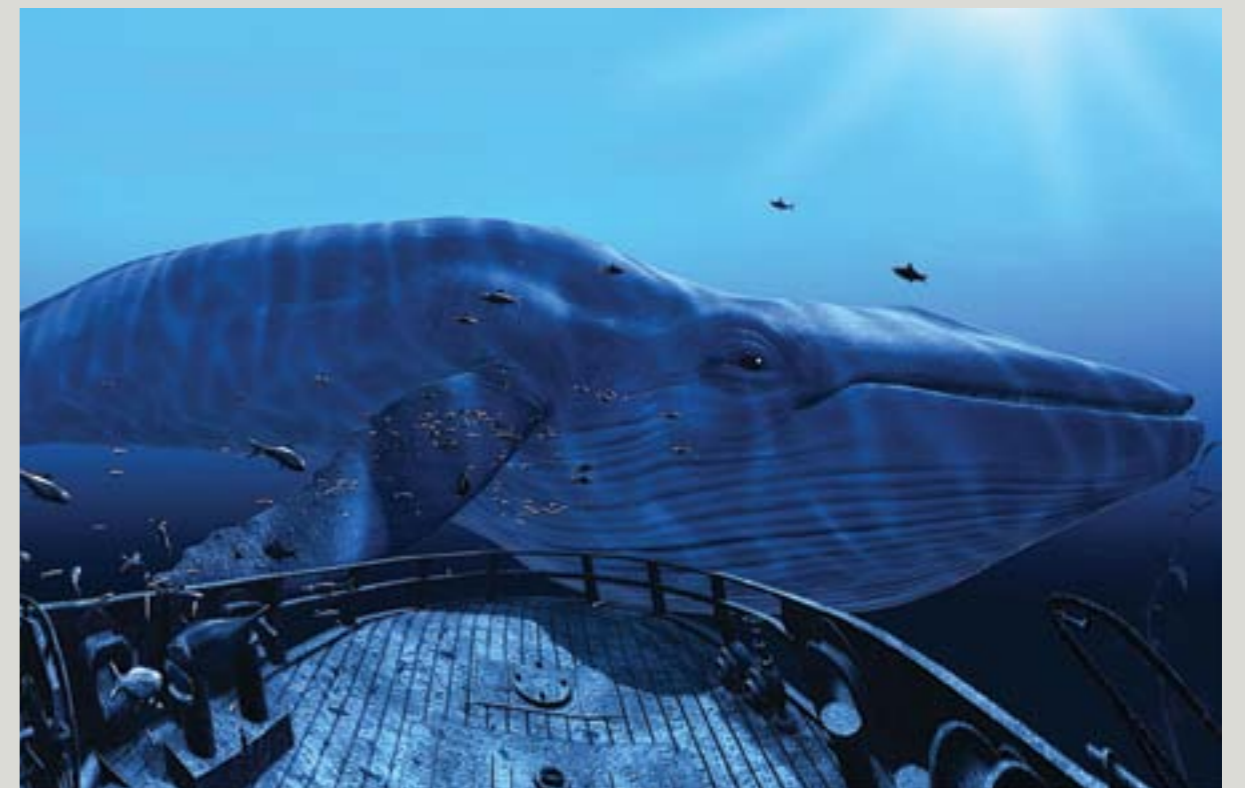
ABOVE RIGHT: In Mssng Peces' *Masquerade* VR project for Dos Equis, The World's Most Interesting Man invites you to look around his party. Agency: Havas Worldwide. mssngpeces.com

RIGHT: From *TheBlu: Encounter* by WEVR. "Imagine coming face-to-face with an 80-foot blue whale, whose eye ball is almost the size of your entire face". See wevr.com

LEFT: From 360 degree live action short *First Wave* by Samir Mallal and Framestore's Aron Hjartarson. See samirmallal.com

simplifies adoption. As Ari Kuschnir, founder of content studio, Mssng Peces, explains, "You already have the phone in your pocket, the headphones in your bag. This thing lets you augment your phone in an amazing new way. Why wouldn't you want to buy it?" For those that don't want to splash out on a fancy Samsung Gear headset, there's Google Cardboard: it's an origami headset made from, well, cardboard and available for around \$10. The setup might sound primitive, but with Cardboard, an iPhone 6 and a wheelie chair you can pass an afternoon riding a simulated roller-coaster round your office.

It's the immediacy of the experience that is so attractive to storytellers like Mallal: "With film it's a seduction, you have to take people there, with VR you just bring them," he says. This phenomenon is known in VR circles as presence, that is, the extent to which you can trick the viewer's limbic system into thinking they are really present in your virtual world. "One way to think about ↵





“What will work in VR is to think of the moments that you just automatically respond to,” says Mallal. Things like vertigo or the sense of being surrounded, evocative places or sounds. In fact sound is key, he suggests, because our ears, compared to our eyes, are relatively trustworthy organs. Voiceover is also effective. Twinned with a POV shot, it can even simulate the sense of occupying someone else’s consciousness.

But just as there are things that VR seems to do effortlessly, it also has a set of limitations that disrupt the vernacular of film. The jump cut and the close-up, used both to heighten emotion and to convey the passage of time, just don’t work. “I’ve seen dissolve on it and it sucks,” says Kuschnir. Similarly, a dolly shot seen through a VR lens can feel disconcertingly like your soul leaving your body. But perhaps the most important difference for directors is the

relaxation of control. Ordinarily, filmmakers use the frame to focus your attention on relevant details, but this becomes more difficult when the viewer can choose which way to look. First Wave uses ingenious 3D sound design to draw your attention. Mssng Peces’ work for Dos Equis combined VR with interactive video to feed the viewers cues. Putting on the headset you found yourself at a masquerade hosted by Dos Equis’s brand ambassador, the World’s Most Interesting Man. “We can always track eye movement, so maybe if you look at a particular woman for too long, she’ll say something snarky to you,” says Kuschnir. With VR you can now be snubbed at a party that isn’t even real.

If you’re trying to convince a client to take a punt on this new medium, the Dos Equis work makes for a useful case study. Although only a few thousand people had the full VR experience, the interactive elements were repurposed for YouTube where they scored around 27 million views. And, assuming you get it right, there


ABOVE: VR madness from Adult Swim’s *Virtual Brainload* by WEVR. See more at adultswim.com/promos/vr

is also a multiplier effect in terms of PR and word-of-mouth. The experience is so new, it will take people’s breath away.

And yet VR still suffers from a chicken-and-egg problem: consumers won’t bother with the headsets without the content, but without the audience, who will make the content? In an attempt to supply this shortfall, WEVR studios in Venice, CA run a grant programme for writers and directors. Before you think ‘yay, free money’, WEVR’s director of content, Ben Miller, sounds a note of caution. “We always ask ‘why is this immersive?’ Because if you want to direct a great music video, just make a great music video. There’s a reason why that form, that type of entertainment works, when it plays back on TV: it’s built around the affordances of that particular technology.” In fact the

‘affordances’ of VR, the fully rotational view, the sense of presence, for Miller are much closer to theatre. “As a fan of theatre I hope the immersive technology is going to bring theatre along with it.”

This is part of the appeal: no-one knows how to do it yet. Warner Bros might crack it, but so could a theatre director with a Go Pro rig. Still sceptical? Try it. “I’ve introduced hundreds of people to VR,” says Miller, “and their first reaction is always the same ‘OK, my mind is blown’. The second, if they’re a creative, is ‘this changes everything’.”

For me it’s a question of when not if. I believe we are going to be spending a lot of time in these virtual worlds. If you didn’t think it was possible to have a closer relationship with your phone, think again. 

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