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FAKLARIS: Can virtual reality be a ‘killer app’ for journalists to tell great stories?

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COMMENTARY

Maybe. It’s absorptive, transporting, immersive—perhaps the true digital heir to the print reading experience.

The technology to re-create a 3D physical environment, or at least to approximate it, [is not new](#). For more than 20 years, companies such as VPL Research, Virtuality, Sega, Sony and Nintendo have trotted out VR systems meant to revolutionize how we consume media. But in each case, the technology has failed to achieve the mainstream success of, say, the smartphone.

Yet the appetite for VR has not waned. Witness the wild success of the 2012 Kickstarter for the Oculus Rift headset, [which raised \\$2.4 million on a goal of \\$250,000](#). Facebook then bought the startup in 2014 for a whopping [\\$2 billion in cash and stock](#). Some who’ve test-driven prototypes say Oculus Rift conveys an eerily accurate “sense of presence” while fixing a problem that bedeviled its predecessors: a mismatch in sensory inputs that creates [motion sickness](#).

VR already has found many industry applications. Raytheon has implemented what it terms CAVEs—computer-assisted virtual environments—[for missile design and development](#). Veterans Administration therapists use VR systems [to help veterans revisit and work through emotional trauma](#). VR also has found its way into museum interactives, the fine arts and, of course, gaming.

Recent experiments show VR can be an effective “you are there” storytelling technique for journalism. Three examples:

- The pioneer in the field is Nonny de la Peña. Among her notable works with the University of Southern California’s School of Cinematic Arts is [Project Syria](#), which lets the viewer experience conditions recorded at a refugee camp and the simulation of a rocket blast on an Aleppo street.
- This spring, de la Peña’s company, Emblematic Group, unveiled an Android and Samsung Gear app [called “One Dark Night”](#) that re-creates the circumstances of the 2012 shooting death of Trayvon Martin using 911 audio, architectural drawings of the neighborhood, and witness testimony.
- Gannett (parent of The Indianapolis Star) also has [looked for ways to use VR](#) in storytelling. For the 2014 “Harvest of Change” series spotlighting the challenges facing Iowa farm families, its Des Moines Register [re-created the Dammann farmstead](#) as a 3D self-guided tour, sprinkled with 360-degree video

interviews with the family and others involved in agriculture.

Dan Pacheco, the journalism innovation chairman at Syracuse University, identified in a 2014 presentation [several other use cases for VR](#), such as explainers on climate change, travel reporting, or the next sports-journalism frontier: true 360-degree coverage of games and matches. “You’ll use a game controller to switch camera angles—and you will pay dearly for the best vantage points.”

Pacheco’s comment points to another reason news sites might embrace VR: new, robust revenue streams. In an immersive 3D environment, viewers might not be able to escape looking at display ads or product placements, driving up their value. “Sponsored stories” or infomercial-type content marketing could become much more compelling.

So far, digital media has largely failed to deliver the absorptive quality so necessary for taking in serious, long-form journalism. But VR could be the killer app that makes it work. Maybe it will even provide the premium advertising experience that can help pay for it. •

Cori Faklaris, better known as “HeyCori” on social media, has most recently been an audience-engagement producer for IndyStar.com and originated its morning “Cheat Sheet.” She currently is researching the future of media and pursuing a master’s degree at IUPUI’s School of Informatics and Computing. Follow her on Twitter [@heycori](#).

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