Lost Horizons: Constructing a Fiction of Knowledge

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ABSTRACT
This extended abstract will map connections between psychogeographical practices and artistic practices which use video game engines to construct virtual reality spaces – from the dual position of both academic and of artist/technologist working directly with virtual reality 3D game design and development. I will explore aesthetic and technical strategies for world-building through a case study of the development of the work *Lost Horizons* (2022), an immersive artwork which constructs a fiction of knowledge by experimenting with the juxtaposition of different perspectives and framing in order to produce a poetic immersive experience. Central to the work is the act of seeing and a poetic sense of space. Amidst the act of wandering alone in an uncannily empty public space, there is the possibility for personal worlds, imagined pasts and futures, and alternative constructions of knowledge.

Keywords
virtual reality as artistic practice, immersive VR, social VR, VRChat, applications of computer games

INTRODUCTION
Humans have a fascination with things that are just beyond the limits of human perceptual understanding, and through this artistic project I want to dive into our collective desire to "see the whole" and the fiction of knowledge that comes from being elevated to the summit "to be a viewpoint and nothing more." (de Certeau, 2002, 92).

Lost Horizons is an immersive artwork with no conventional goals or quests. Instead, players are free to wander through the massive virtual world available on the social multiplayer platform VRChat - starting at the site of a mysterious plane crash in the mountaintops. The work is published on the VRChat platform which allows for multiplayer space that can be public and private in different instances.

In a huge maze-like bookstore with bright posters exhorting the viewer to get lost in travel literature, you find clues to a story about a group of passengers who have crash-landed in a place that is not on any maps. In another space, a misty field is littered with conspiracy theory documents and the telecommunications equipment used in the search for the lost plane. The virtual world provides ingredients for the spatial experience, allowing the viewer to produce their own emergent story.

Immersive virtual reality allows us to take full advantage of what spatial theorists like de Certeau have described to be a "lust to be a viewpoint" by rapidly bringing the audience to different virtual worlds and perspectives. Through both a juxtaposition of

different in-game content and framing, the singularity of vision is placed at question and splits into a multiplicity of perspectives, constructing a fiction of knowledge.

BACKGROUND

As an artist, my early practice was first inspired by psychogeography and informed by the act of walking, which then progressed from walking in the city to walking in virtual game spaces and metaverses such as Second Life and VRChat, and finally using game engines to create immersive virtual reality worlds as artworks, such as *VOID* (2021) and *Lost Horizons* (2022). I'm interested in mapping the connections between psychogeographical practices which are often located in real cities and artistic practices which use video game engines to construct virtual reality worlds - what are the affinities or gaps that exist when trying to locate a psychogeographical practice in virtual reality?

ACTS OF SEEING AND EMERGENCE OF SPATIALITIES

We understand virtual reality through the lens of the other immersive media we have experienced, and readings of virtual reality are invariably haunted by the many spectatorial and aesthetic affinities it shares with cartography as well as the other older "immersive" visual technologies (Griffiths, 2022) such as camera obscura, magic lanterns, dioramas, large-scale painting, stereoscopic images, holography, photography, cinema, panoramas and 360 video – mediums which share a similar goal of surrounding us and immersing us in another world.

To get a picture of these spectatorial affinities, we can look to the relationship between space, cinema, and cartography. In the unfinished Arcades Project (1999), Walter Benjamin ruminates on the possibility of a cinematographic map of Paris. In Atlas of Emotion (2002), Giuliana Bruno explores the ways in which the immaterial geographies of film revitalise our engagement and interaction with landscapes. In Cartographic Cinema (2007), Tom Conley investigates how cinema employs a projective apparatus similar to mapping, where the map can be viewed as an image that situates and organises the spectator's imagination. Artists like Teresa Castro, Anne Friedberg, Brooke Belisle, and Ken Hillis have also explored similar questions of how cinema creates space for viewers to roam about like voyagers. The map exploits aesthetics and technology in order to convey how people create and experience space.

Conversely, visual artistic mediums such as photography and cinema can also be seen to have shaped and advanced contemporary digital cartography in how modern digital maps involve camera angles from different perspectives. Real and virtual cameras capture and document environments from different angles and perspectives, drawing influences from art in how the map combines the image and map, how the map zooms, and how it shifts in perspective. (Caquard, 2009).

To draw upon the richness of these spectatorial affinities, as a lead-in to the discussion on the development of the work *Lost Horizons*, the paper will take a close look at three photographs which have inspired the development of the work, and how both the photographs and the immersive artwork "Lost Horizons" exemplify a fiction of knowledge: the James Webb Space Telescope's image of Cosmic Cliffs which exemplifies an image's transition from fact to concept, a selfie image of the Mars Rover which reflects how technologies of vision create a fiction of knowledge of planet Mars, and finally the photograph of multinational aircrew and aircrafts used in the unsuccessful Operation Southern Indian Ocean to search for the missing MH370 – reads as an insistence to construct a fiction of knowledge over domains we have yet to fully understand.

Through a discussion on the development of *Lost Horizons*, I will explore aesthetic as well as technical strategies for world-building that artists, art researchers, and writers may find useful exploring in practice and future research.
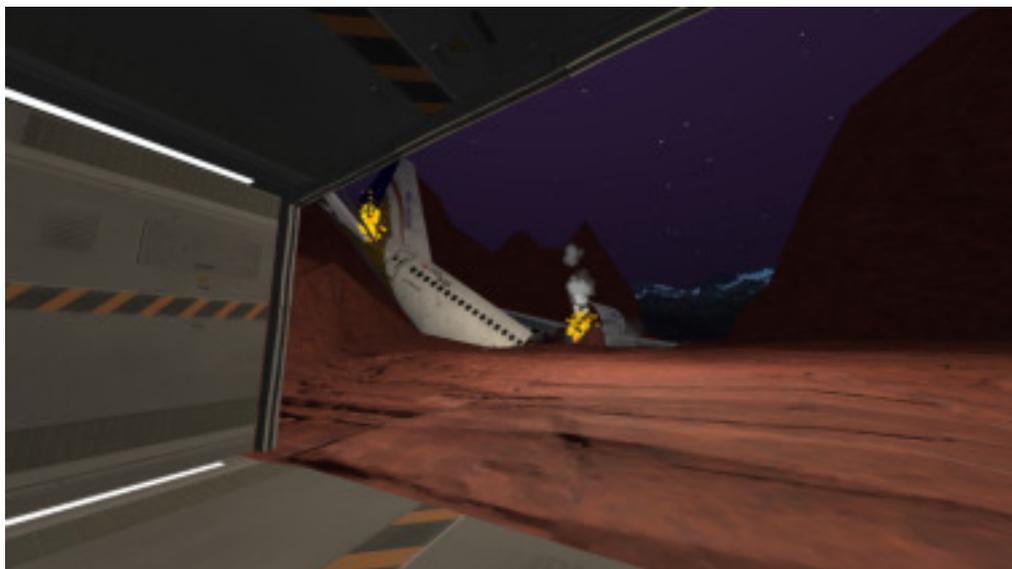

Figure 1: *Lost Horizons* (2022), an immersive artwork published as a public social multiplayer VRChat world for C/O Digital's Festival on 9-10 Dec 2022. Image credit: the Author.
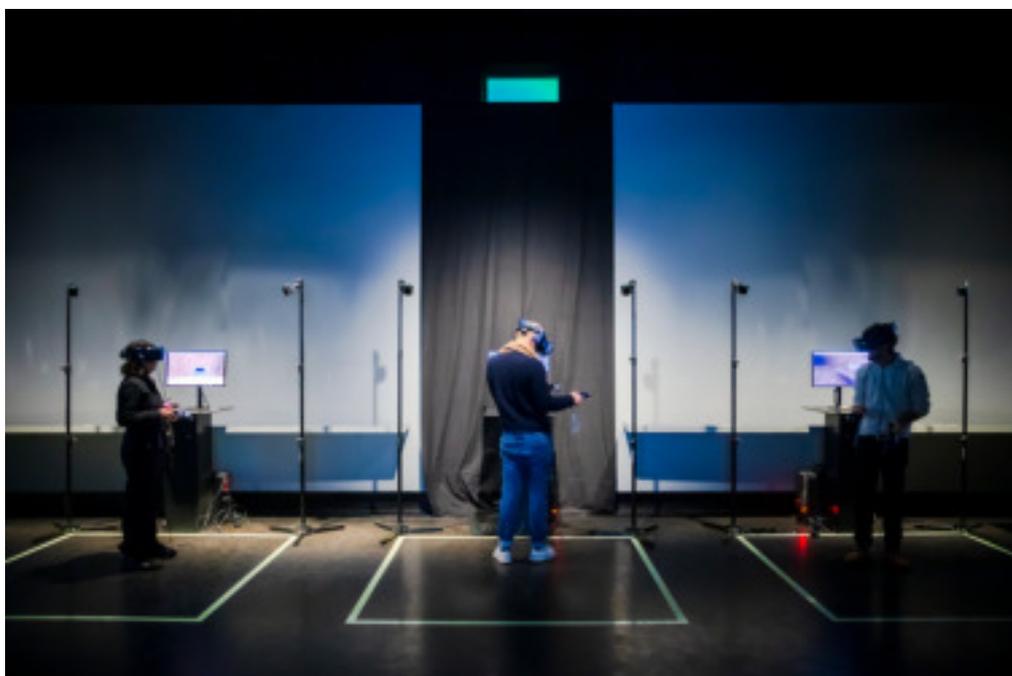

Figure 2: *Lost Horizons* (2022) played live by multiple players exploring the same instance of the world at C/O Digital's Festival on 9-10 Dec 2022. Image credit: C/O Berlin.

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