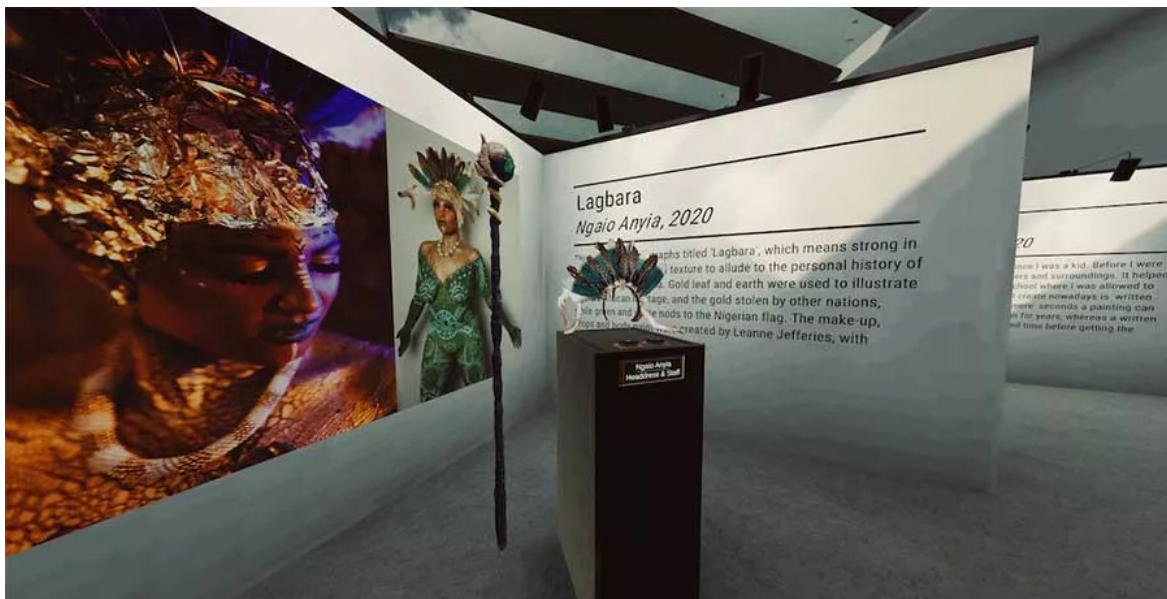


News

LGBTQ+ VR Museum Brings Queer History to the Metaverse

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By Manuel Charr



A new exhibition at the 2022 Tribeca Festival in New York City has garnered a lot of attention for both its subject matter and the technology that has been used to bring it to life.

Dedicated to the LGBTQ+ community, the virtual reality (VR) museum was unveiled at the annual festival, organised by Tribeca Productions. According to the creative team behind the VR show, the original idea was to create the world's first LGBTQ+ museum in the metaverse. The approach, they said, came from a need 'to plug the gap in queer history' by collecting and preserving the personal histories of people from within the LGBTQ+ community.

According to Antonia Forster, the creator and director of the LGBTQ+ VR Museum, the idea was to generate a gallery space that would be dedicated to celebrating the lives of ordinary queer people by commemorating them in the VR metaverse. An extended reality specialist who works in metaverse projects professionally from her base of operations in the UK showcased the unique project in the United States but says she has plans to return it to the city where she lives, Bristol. Forster, who studied at the University of Bristol and who is an alumnus of We The Curious, a scientific education centre on Bristol's harbourside, used three-dimensional scans of real-life artefacts to bring the VR museum to life.

Personal Stories

The digital scans were made of objects that had belonged to the people featured in the exhibition who had shared their personal life stories. What Forster did was to project the 3D images into a virtual space that visitors could explore using VR technology. The objects she chose ranged from a teddy bear to a pair of wedding shoes. All attendees of the virtual exhibition needed to do was to interact with the scan in front of them and it would play an audio story for users to listen to. Each such story represented a true example of life from an LGBTQ+ perspective, in which each individual explained what their personal item meant to them.



Among the many exhibits on display at the LGBTQ+ VR museum is a larger-than-life sculpture that looks as though it was rendered in marble rather than being a digital asset. This work of art portrays the artist who create it, Patricia Cronin, in bed alongside her wife, another artist named Deborah Kass. The stone version of the sculpture has been in place at a cemetery for two decades, about the same length of time the Tribeca Festival has been running. According to Cronin, the stone sculpture weighs just under three tonnes and represents the pair with dignity. Entitled Memorial to Marriage, this is the first time the artwork has been represented in a virtual reality setting. "It gives me a sense of pride to see the first marriage equality monument now take its place in the first LGBT VR museum," Cronin said.

Emotional Responses

According to Antonia Forster, a senior XR Technical Specialist at Unity who works on VR, AR, MR/XR and hand-tracking technologies, the exhibits at the LGBTQ+ VR Museum have made people laugh and cry. "I have seen a lot of people gasp," she said. Speaking about the wedding shoes virtual exhibit, Forster said that they had received a particularly emotive response. Bought long before marriage between women was legal in the United States, they were considered almost as a joke by the couple that owned them. According to Forster, the testimony of the couple who then went on to wear the shoes on their wedding day when same-sex marriage was legalised has often struck a chord among attendees.



Indeed, Forster can view visitors' reactions thanks to the metaverse technology the exhibition uses. Before they don the VR gear needed to explore the museum, they are wired up. This allows Forster to measure key response metrics, such as their heart rate and sweat output. The museum is expected to relocate to another part of New York City in September before, perhaps, coming to the UK.

About the author – Manuel Charr

Manuel Charr is a journalist working in the arts and cultural sectors. With a background in marketing, Manuel is drawn to arts organizations which are prepared to try inventive ways to reach new audiences.

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