

Extended reality bites

By  Gil Sperling

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Advancements in platform technology and peripheral hardware are increasingly blurring the lines between the virtual world and reality.



Image supplied.

With augmented reality (AR), predominantly orchestrated via mobile devices and a growing list of wearables, and virtual reality (VR) enabled via traditional headsets, becoming more pervasive, these technologies are transforming how people experience and engage with the world, with each other and, increasingly, with brands.

While not a new form of technology by any means, significant investments have been made by Microsoft (HoloLens), Google (Glass and Daydream) and Facebook (Oculus), along with a number of innovative wearables start-ups like DAQRI. These have driven the nascent VR and AR trends forward, creating what is collectively being termed “immersive computing”.

Each of these terms currently refers to a unique experience defined by its hardware, but new platforms are emerging that are capable of combining more than one immersive technology – commonly known as mixed reality (MR) – to deliver experiences across the extended reality (XR) spectrum.

Championing the application of XR experiences and shifting the engagement paradigm locally is an innovative start-up

called Alt Reality.

Speaking at Popimedia's [third workshop in a series](#), which aims to shift the thinking of senior marketers around design, marketing and business in the digital age, was Rick Treweek, Alt Reality founder and creative technologist.

Boundaries no longer apply

Treweek explained: "VR allows someone to be present in a physical space while immersed in a digital environment. In this virtual realm the boundaries imposed on creativity and physics in the real world no longer apply. And when a creative mind realises that the normal rules can be bent and broken, amazing things happen. This is when unique and novel content is created that engages and captivates all the major senses, delivering a powerful and compelling immersive experience."

In addition, this functionality is fundamentally changing the way people engage with technology, elaborated Treweek. "By moving away from keyboards, trackpads and a mouse to a more intuitive engagement interface, even technophobes are being leapfrogged into the digital age. Today all you need is a VR headset and system, and anyone can easily engage with the digitised world."

Treweek admits that there is often hesitation and trepidation from people when donning the VR headset, because it can feel so foreign and the experience is so visceral. "People initially feel like they aren't in control of the virtual experience."

To solve the problem, Alt Reality 3-D printed a handheld case that houses the VR headset, sans the head straps. This innovation allows users to hold the headset up to their face to control when and how VR augments their experience. Alt Reality has applied this to a number of innovative campaigns for big brands such as IBM, Denel, Jaguar and the Origin Centre Museum, which is creating traction for XR technologies among everyday consumers.

In this way Treweek and his team are also shifting how corporate training and on-boarding are delivered, through sister company Alt 360. "By applying existing content in an VR environment and blending it with new digital content, we're giving new employees an opportunity to learn and engage in their own time and in a contextually relevant manner," explained Treweek.

Richer experience

By using the hand-held VR headset, employees can look at a device, point of interest or location and an overlay of information or a tutorial pops up. "By augmenting the real world with virtual content in this manner we create a far richer experience, making training or on-boarding more impactful."

And this is how brands can also gain a strategic advantage from the adoption of XR. Take the retail environment as an example. Already consumers are blending their in-store experiences with online engagement and content via their mobile devices. Imagine how much richer the experience could be in brick-and-mortar stores when the physical and virtual worlds are merged using VR headsets or rich, fit-for-purpose AR platforms?

If hardware and content innovation are allowed to flourish, driven by an acceleration in the adoption of these technologies, then the potential is there for a utopian XR future where smartphones, mobile VR headset and AR glasses converge into a single wearable that can seamlessly transition between virtual, augmented and real realities to enrich consumer experiences in real-time and on-demand.

However, there is no reason for brands to wait before incorporating XR into their marketing mix. The technology available today, as evidenced at the SHiFT event, can already deliver memorable brand experiences, which supports the shift in consumer demands for meaningful, rich and contextually-relevant engagement that also delivers on an emotional level.

However, there's a hesitation by many brands to explore the implementation of XR in their marketing campaigns. As Treweek explained, many marketing execs are still grappling with how this technology can be applied to help brands and

customers navigate the digital world.

Faith and bravery

“Brands that want to compete in the modern digital economy need faith and bravery to attempt something never done before,” believes Treweek. That’s also why marketers need to find more opportunities to engage with and experience these technologies, because it is only when you immerse yourself in them that you can truly understand what is possible in an XR-enabled world.

While it will take time before VR headset use crosses over from early adopters such as gamers into everyday home use to enrich the lives of consumers, Treweek believes that tipping point is fast approaching. As such, marketing executives better start preparing.

Thankfully we only need only look to the art industry to glimpse what the future holds. Galleries have become the testbed for innovation in mixed reality (MR) experiences, with the exhibition at TMRW Gallery, located in Rosebank, Johannesburg, offering a prime example of what’s possible with this technology.

Attendees at the SHiFT workshop got to experience first-hand how Treweek and his team are challenging the notion of how we experience art, ahead of the opening of the gallery’s first virtual art exhibition, titled “The Invisible Exhibition”.

“It’s the future of the gallery space, but more importantly, these artists are helping to expose this technology to a broader market. We’re also doing so in an environment where people are more willing to engage and are open to exploring abstract concepts by venturing into the unknown,” suggested Treweek.

Rapidly changing consumer engagement paradigm

“Art creation has no rules about what it’s supposed to be, allowing both digital and traditional artists to create intriguing artworks in the virtual realm. Conversely, traditional marketing and corporate thinking can often be stifled by preconceived boundaries and self-imposed restrictions about what’s acceptable and what actually works. As such, art is the ideal testing ground for the application of this new sensorial technology.”

Artists like Treweek are therefore the ones currently driving innovation in the application of XR technology in the real world, but opportunities abound for brand managers who are forward-thinking enough to take the first-mover advantage.

Visiting places like the TMRW Art Gallery to explore these new technologies is, therefore, a sensible – dare I say essential – step for all marketers who want to keep step with the rapidly changing consumer engagement paradigm.

By adding layers to traditional environments and established experiences through XR, brands can better engage with consumers and create an emotional response that prompts deeper, more meaningful engagement, stated Treweek.

However, he believes that the technology should not be the focus. Attendees saw how technology can be woven into experiences to enhance our interaction with the world around us by engaging multiple senses.

And it is these types of technology-mediated experiences that can elicit a powerful emotional response from consumers and can bring a brand to life in unique and memorable ways. It was a surreal glimpse into where this technology is taking the world and attendees were left in little doubt that XR is the future of digital consumer engagement.

ABOUT GIL SPERLING

Gil Sperling is cofounder and co-CEO of Flow, a proptech company that goes straight to the source of the largest social platforms in the world - to match people with property.

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