

BOOK REVIEW

The Immersive Enclosure: Virtual Reality in Japan

By Paul Roquet

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Reviewed by Michael VALLANCE

Virtual reality is a three-dimensional, computer-generated environment. As you don a virtual reality headset your vision adjusts to a new environment and your imagination jettisons your body's sensory and physical restraints as you leave behind the real world, the first-person perceptual logic inviting you to enter a seductive metaverse.

The Immersive Enclosure by Paul Roquet expertly details the social and historical situatedness of Japanese interpretations of the alluring metaverse. In early iterations, virtual reality practitioners in the U.S. constructed virtual environments to simulate the real world, but in Japan the goal was to obscure reality and enter a new world, positioning the user as the focal point of perceptual enclosure. Roquet tackles this perspective by examining the cultural politics of new media as it transformed in Japan from shared entertainment (for example, TV, hi-fi stereo) to isolated privatized perceptual bubbles (for example, the Walkman, Oculus Go) and the desire for personal spatial control to disengage from the real world. The cultural politics of virtual reality is subsequently investigated through an historical framing of the politics of perceptual enclosure.

Jaron Lanier, who is credited with popularizing the term “virtual reality,” struggled to classify virtual reality research projects coming out of Japan and had to simply refer to them as strange experiments—peculiar technological solutions of undefined problems, where light-hearted entertainment was prioritized over serious application. Japan is often viewed from afar as bizarre and weird, with glitzy neon cityscapes represented by dystopian futuristic scenes from the Philip Dick-inspired movie, *Bladerunner*. This image is no different when viewed in the imagined environments of Japanese virtual reality. But it is not odd at all. *The Immersive Enclosure* informs us that Japan has its own interpretations of virtual reality, and these are likely to be discordant with the aspirations of Mark Zuckerberg's heavily-financed metaverse.

The book begins with the emergence of the one-person media space, then guides us through the research and technology of the popular culture of virtual reality in Japan. Chapter 1 discusses the historically central role of audio as people desire isolation in non-virtual immersive spaces. Initially there was much disdain shown to commuters wearing the Walkman, for instance, but the emergence of the one-person space as a physical entity, with one room apartment blocks proliferating in urban spaces, demanded a particular

social and physical reframing of technologies in order to accommodate spatial ambience, and subsequent acceptance. Yet it may be a while before youngsters wearing virtual reality headsets on public transport meet the same level of acceptance in mainstream Japan.

Chapter 2 details the reimagining of virtual reality towards the fictional, fantasy worlds which dominate Japanese games. With the competing terms—cyberspace, artificial reality, and virtual reality—having shifted the narrative away from the initially dominant U.S. military applications, a discussion of Japanese etymological interpretations of an imaginary space contrasts hypothetical fiction simulating reality. This helps us understand why Japanese approach virtual reality technologies “as a tool for fabricating fictional layers that add to rather than simulate the existing world” (p. 79).

Chapter 3 reflects on the notion of corporations controlling its workers as physical commutes and communication decline, arguing that an “emphasis on perceptual enclosure stands to make even a person’s social ‘presence’ dependent on the whims of VR platform providers” (p. 81). Corporations’ desire for increased productivity of the telepresent workforce has been experienced during the past two years of the coronavirus pandemic lockdown as many people have worked from home, but future embodied VR-enabled telework systems may lead to people being technologically housebound, and maybe even too scared to go outdoors. Roquet argues it is imperative to consider whose interests are served by remote working, and what it means to be present in the perceptual enclosure of work. There are warnings about privacy and tracking in virtual reality, the control of our virtual social interactions (as we have witnessed with current social media), the monetization of our views, and disciplining workers to conform in the occupational metaverse.

Chapter 4 discusses the cultural politics of a perceptual enclosure, with the virtual reality headset being a portal to immersion in fantasy worlds, and analyzes the desires, anxieties, and fears of other worlds. The examples of a reimagining of colonial pasts cast Japanese as altruistic saviors over harmful Americans in a gothic mediaeval world of European architecture. Virtual reality in Japan is motivated by “the quest narratives of fantasy literature and role-playing games” (p. 106), with narratives intertwined with “transformations in the Japanese social and historical imagination” (p. 106).

Chapter 5 highlights patriarchal control of virtual reality spaces, with human men immersed in a world of skimpily-clad, fetishized, teenage virtual girls. Even Unity-chan, a freely available 3D model of the most popular application for virtual reality development, is a sexualized heroine character. The relationship with real-world anime, manga, games, and *otaku* are sensibly discussed, as references to mainstream and academic literature provide balanced arguments: “Otaku defenses of the sexualization of young girls often hinge on the assertion that the characters are entirely and explicitly fictional” (p. 150). However, as Roquet acknowledges, Japanese virtual reality is rife with gendered stereotypes of boys in control and girls being submissive. Despite a desire for more gender equity, the current beneficiaries of virtual reality remain predictable in Japan’s patriarchal society.

Roquet concludes with a call for more open virtual reality repositories beyond the powerful corporations such as Meta, and cautions that as we become immersed in an enclosed space, relocating our real world, we need to confront “what it means for a media interface to assert control over someone’s spatial awareness” (p. 177). Through theoretical

exploration and pragmatic exemplification of perceptual enclosure, Roquet successfully demonstrates how virtual reality in Japan emerges from a uniquely cultural and historical perspective, inspiring others to address the local specificity of their virtual reality. *The Immersive Enclosure* can be their guide.