

# New Realities in Cyberspace: Understanding the Virtual Reality Location- based Entertainment in China

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Virtual reality, media convergence, location-based entertainment, creative workers, China

## INTRODUCTION

Virtual Reality Location-based Entertainment (VR LBE) is now the focus of VR applications (Rogers, 2019; Sag, 2019). A timely survey by *Greenlight Insights* has indicated that the total number of global VR venues in 2019 is in the excess of ten thousand with a market value of US\$3.6 billion.<sup>1</sup> Thus, as evidenced from the emergence of renowned VR brands such as *The Void*, *Zero Latency*, and *VR Zone*, VR LBE has come to be widely accepted into mainstream media and popular culture. This can be observed from VR and entertainment converging within real-world entertainment life which has drawn the attention of conglomerates including Google, Facebook, and HTC (A. Jenkins, 2019).

Both China, as the world's largest ownership of VR devices (PwC, 2019), and the potential value of VR in the creative industries (Abbasi, Vassilopoulou, & Stergioulas, 2017; Harper, 2017; Leovaridis & Bahna, 2017), are to be looked at with an urge of academic importance. Research for this article was undertaken as part of a PhD research project to study the sustainability of VR content production in China. To examine the process and mechanisms of VR content production, it is considerably important to understand why and how VR LBE gradually emerged in China. This is in light of the history with an overwhelming number of VR enterprises becoming bankrupt from 2016 to 2017 (Shan, 2019). Inspired from the study of by Banks and Cunningham (2016) regarding the creative destruction of the Australian videogame industry, this paper predominantly reviews the history of VR LBE in China and examines how the contribution of VR creative workers (using their knowledge and resources) transforms the landscape of VR content production in China. In answering this question, two case studies with a qualitative approach were undertaken with China-based VR creative workers, including IQIYI VR and SoReal theme park. It involved extensive semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and less formal discussions with the employees of a few well-known entertainment enterprises in China such as Tencent and Perfect World Games. Numerous Chinese universities including Beijing Normal University, Central Academy of Fine Arts, and Beijing Film Academy also provided a juncture to both describe and explore the ways in which VR creative workers adaptively approach the opportunities and challenges of VR and LBE.

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Drawing from the history of VR LBE in China from 2014 to 2019 using the Hype Cycle framework (Fenn & Raskino, 2008), this paper highlights the shift in China's VR industry from a blind and aggressive approach to a more rational and strategic participation. Once dominated by the now bankrupt grass-root start-ups, and little impact from the consumer market, the VR LBE landscape is now heavily influenced by the resourcefulness and financial investment of larger and established enterprises. Hence, situated in the creative trident theory (Higgs & Cunningham, 2008) and media convergence theory (H. Jenkins, 2001), this paper raises the discussion of media convergence in the field of creative industries studies from the aspects of business, culture, and social networks, with recognition of the precarity to academia. It suggests that sustainability of VR content production can be achieved with reliance on the subjective awareness and professional capacity of VR creative workers, rather than primarily from supportive government policy and economic situations.

## BIO

Yu Shan is a PhD candidate at the Digital Media Research Centre, Queensland University of Technology. She is also a research assistant at the Institute for Cultural Industries, Shenzhen University. Her research interests include creative economy, immersive media, and content production in Asia. Recent publications include peer-review journal article on *Cultural Science Journal*.

Nathan Corporal is a PhD student at the Science and Engineering Faculty, Queensland University of Technology. His primary research is framework design for VR 3D audio systems integrating into VR LBE. His research interests include post-production audio for interactive and linear media, with practical experience in traditional and VR media sound design.

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## **ENDNOTES**

- <sup>1</sup> Global Location-Based Virtual Reality Spending to Reach \$3.6 Billion in 2019, says Greenlight Insights <https://greenlightinsights.com/location-based-virtual-reality-reaching-3-6-billion-in-2019-says-greenlight-insights/>