

Virtually real: using virtual reality to bring people together for meetings & outreach

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What if you could host an event that was instantly accessible by people from around the world, where attendees could meet and chat with one another, while showcasing science through interactive models and immersive environments? And all you would need to join is an internet connection.

Virtual reality (VR) has traditionally been viewed as a niche for computer gaming. But use of VR is steadily increasing in academic, educational, and co-operative settings for people meeting online, whether for a lecture, public event, training, or working group discussion. VR offers a fully immersive environment, where the use of avatars in a spatial setting produces an experience that is far closer to face-to-face interactions than traditional online options such as Zoom. Avatars provide a localised presence within the online space that allows directional audio and volume fall-off with distance. Simultaneous and overlapping conversations are therefore possible in the same event space, allowing attendees to chat with different people, change between conversations if they overhear a topic of interest, and freely explore different areas and exhibits within a virtual world.

Perhaps due to its origins in the gamer community, there are myths suggesting that VR is inaccessible and exclusive. However, many VR social platforms are accessible from a desktop or smartphone and web browser, as well as a VR headset. VR headsets also no longer require a separate powerful PC, but are standalone units with a similar price tag to a gaming console; a cost substantially less than a single attendance at most domestic conferences. The VR software platform is usually free to access for attendees, and either free or low cost for the event host, with many off-the-rack environments to choose from and easily customise.

Over the last few years, we have run several events in virtual reality aimed at different audiences. These have included a series of talks focussed on “Science for the Public Good”, networking events at an academic conference that include a virtual exhibit space showing models from JAXA and CSIRO, and talks for school students using a virtual environment that lets you stand on an asteroid. This talk will discuss these events, including lessons learned, problems tackled, and best practices for the future.

Statistics taken of online events and meetings run during the pandemic have shown that accessibility and diversity blooms when in-person attendance is not necessary to participate. This shows that to hold truly globalised meetings, we cannot go backwards to in-person-only events. Virtual reality shows a way we can go forwards, and step far beyond what has been achievable in the past.

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