

Extraordinary Accident: an immersive metaphor of Hong Kong

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Abstract

This paper presents Extraordinary Accident, an immersive experience exploring how different levels of abstraction can coexist and collaborate in the representation and recreation of urban space. Using Hong Kong as both inspiration and data source, the work attempts to liberate virtual reality compositions from their metaphorical ballast –that is, their recreational onus– and instead, with a temporal amalgamation of poetic representation at different scales, contribute to an alternative, potentially more intimate, understanding of the urban experience.

Keywords

Virtual reality, installation, artwork, audio visual, Hong Kong

Introduction

“The day when virtual reality becomes more powerful than reality will be the day of the big accident. Mankind never experienced such an extraordinary accident.” – Paul Virilio [1]

In this paper we present *Extraordinary Accident*, a virtual reality experience that reflects on Hong Kong’s urban experience, focusing on the differences and similarities that different perceptual scales may offer.

The search for alternative ways to engage with cities offers a long tradition within the arts. From the Situationists’ “arts of urban exploration” [2] to parodic experiences offered by videogames like *SimCity* [3], and including immersive computer-based experiences such as Jeffrey Shaw’s seminal *Legible City* [4] and Myron Krueger’s *Artificial Reality* [5], among many others.

Virtual reality, however, has never been comfortable with its ontological oxymoron, that is, its need to simultaneously emulate reality and to develop an original, relevant, visual language.

In effect, researchers and artists often focus on either a somewhat futile quest for hyperrealism, or in a sometimes-

infantile assumption of a post-historicity that tends to ignore centuries of visual development.

This dichotomy does resonate strongly with Hong Kong’s contemporary and historical duality. Hong Kong is a city that has long been defined by successful navigations of explicitly opposing forces that simultaneously negate and reinforce themselves. Forces that have propelled a city unique in its ability to define its own historicity.

This duality is perhaps epitomised by Hong Kong’s Central District, which is “linked by a complex system of second level walkways which are a direct consequence of the government’s high land-price policy” [6]. Capitalism’s public space–private space duality appears here in a unique manner that resolves in the creation of a new scale, a *zooming out* (or *in*) that, while creating new points of view, also opens new spaces for urban negotiation.

The Accident

Extraordinary Accident consists of a VR experience aiming to explore this fractal coexistence of different realities in Hong Kong.

With an explicit intention of exploring the aesthetics of virtual reality, our work attempts to construct –perhaps reclaim– a space of visual poetics able to escape the aforementioned duality. This exploration is organised in two axes, a *temporal axis* that imagines Hong Kong’s past, present, and future, and a *scale axis*, that explores different points of view, from an imagine microscopic scale, to a city-wide bird’s eye–view.

The experience consists of a sequence of seven scenes, each one reflecting on Hong Kong from a different configuration in these axes. The scenes, however, do not attempt a realistic rendering but, instead, attempt to explore some intrinsic quality of Hong Kong’s experience.

Extraordinary Accident’s first scene, shown in Figure 1, imagines Hong Kong’s landscape before humans. A primal land at the beginning of time. Hong Kong’s beautiful

landscape is evoked by synthetic hills that prefigure future human intervention.

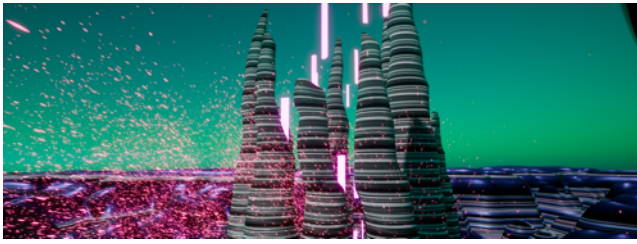


Figure 1- *Extraordinary Accident*, scene one.

The second scene (Figure 2) jumps forward in the temporal axis to explore contemporary Hong Kong's urban experience. The scene puts the user in a non-existent corner that strongly evokes the density dense anthropocentric aesthetic of Kowloon—the peninsula facing Hong Kong island.

The user starts to fly upwards, experiencing new points of view of this corner, full of Hong Kong's traditional neon signs.



Figure 2- *Extraordinary Accident*, scene two.

Scene three presents a momentary jump in *scale*. While flying upwards in the previous scene, the user jumps into a microscopic scale. This scene suggests a non-anthropocentric view. What is the smallest scale of the Anthropocene? After a short exploration of this imagined reality, the user is back in the corner, flying upward, until reaching scene four.



Figure 3- *Extraordinary Accident*, scene three.

The upward movement continues in the fourth scene, where Hong Kong's distinctive visual style is reimagined, with neon signs metaphorically represented as pulsating neon walls.



Figure 4- *Extraordinary Accident*, scene four.

This trip upwards allows the following scene to jump in *scale*, showing a visualisation of photogrammetric and geo-located data. The participant flies over a rendering of Hong Kong island's buildings, constructing and deconstructing it. The scene proposes a dialogue between visualisation and representation, with the objective of making explicit that the experience is a metaphor, not a hyper-realistic rendering. This is achieved by adopting a *glitch aesthetic* and by changing between textured and wireframe renderings (figures 5 and 6).

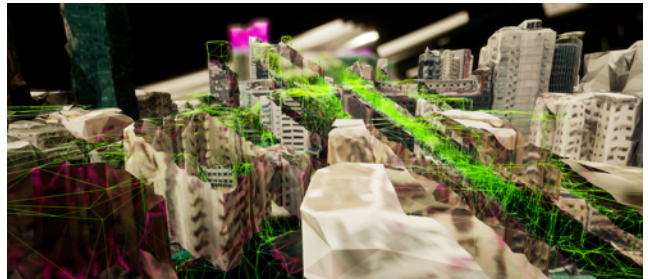


Figure 5- Scene five of *Extraordinary Accident*.

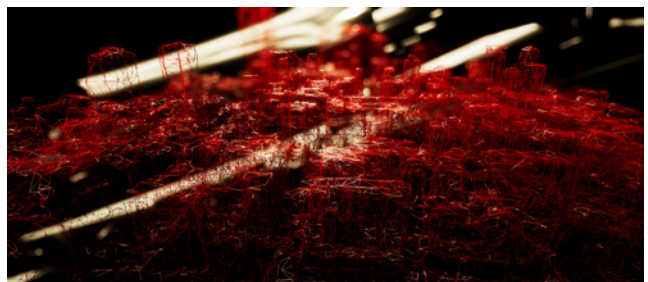


Figure 6- Another abstracted representation of Hong Kong, as seen in scene five of *Extraordinary Accident*.

The traversing of both scale and time axes, is culminated with a future Hong Kong rendered from a very high distance. The sixth scene imagines a future Hong Kong, still bright and clean, hopeful and vibrant. The scene is

simultaneously intimate and distant. The user is able to see further away than in any other scene. The imagined future is bright.

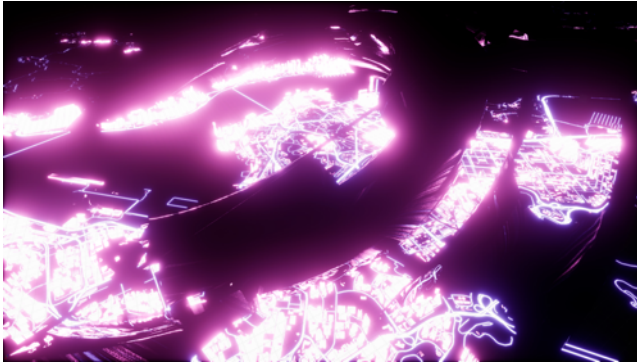


Figure 7- *Extraordinary Accident*, scene six.

The last scene takes the participant back in scale, and even forward in the future. The seventh scene shows a never-ending digital sea. There is no land anymore, only the sea remains. The metaphorical Hong Kong, once a fishermen's village, has transcended representation.

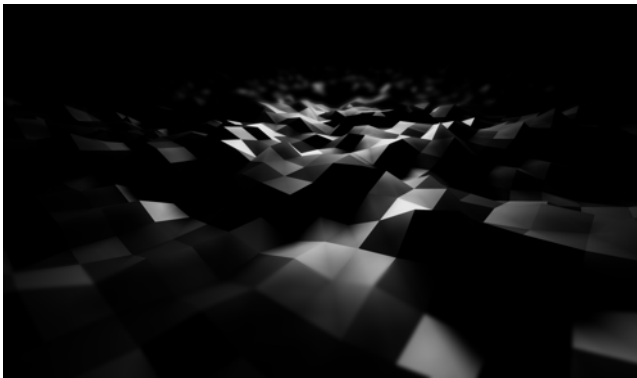


Figure 8- *Extraordinary Accident*, scene seven.

Postlude

Extraordinary Accident is offered not as an explanation of local realities, nor as a transgressive exploration of what virtual reality *should be*; instead it proposes an artistic exploration of the spaces of sensibility that both the city of Hong Kong and virtual reality as a medium may offer and construct.

This exploration can be seen as a valorisation of the different sensibilities that coexist and compete in a city like Hong Kong, believing that technology can aim at recuperating community, political, and local identities [7].

Extraordinary Accident reminds us that while our conceptualisation is inevitably anthropocentric, our understanding coexists with other possible, imagined vantage points. And still, the Kantian conceptual ouroboros remains inescapable.

Reclaiming the anthropocentrism can liberate us from the desire of an impossible trans-human objectivity. Virilio's accident is not post-human but, at most, meta-human. In the conjunction of different perspectives, we reclaim the humanity of our vision while detaching us from the individual experience.

If Vilem Flusser's black box is a *conditio sine qua non* of capitalistic consumption of technology, *Extraordinary Accident* plays by the rules. Perhaps the rules are the conditions for our poem to rhyme.

Virtual reality can be seen as embodying a triumphant Anthropocene, a liberation of nature. It constitutes the reign of the human. If the dreamland is so tempting, why, then, the obsession with telepresence? Perhaps hyperreality is not a technical feat but an automated response to the panic of the unknown, a *horror vacui* in the face of infinite possibilities.

Extraordinary Accident comfortably inhabits the interregnum, a poetic hyperreality, a dream-state that resonates with our humble day-to-day experience.

The audio-visual journey aspires to be unapologetically hedonist. *Extraordinary Accident* wants to entertain, for we flirt with the sublime. It wants to seduce, for it needs to fight for perceptual real state. The embodied cognitive wealth is up for grabs. However, the dice are loaded.

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Authors Biographies

Tomás Lorenzo is an artist and academic who works with both physical and digital media, exploring meaning, power and politics. With a background in both computer science and art, Lorenzo's work spans across different practices and interests, including new media art, HCI, machine learning, and VR. His artistic production includes installations, music, performance, and digital lutherie. His artworks and performances have been shown globally. He is assistant professor at the School of Creative Media, City University of Hong Kong.

Alejandro Rodríguez is an architect, artist, and technology developer. His work focuses on the research and combination of new

technologies in the creation of new products, services and artworks. Since 2004 his work, as director of Dogrush Studios has centred on VR and mixed realities. His works has been seen by millions of people and includes, video mapping shows, massive public installations, as well as large stage designs both for governments and private institutions.

Tatjana Kudinova is an artist and designer based in Hong Kong. Her work focuses on creating engaging experiences and on exploring artistic tools through art and design, taking the form of interactive installations, interfaces, prints and videos. Tatjana's work has been presented at festivals and galleries in cities like Vilnius, Valencia, San Francisco, New York, Sydney, Montevideo, and Hong Kong. Born in Lithuanian SSR, Tatjana has lived in Spain, United States, Uruguay and Hong Kong. She holds an MA in Fine Arts, earned by studying at the Art Academy of Vilnius, Polytechnic University of Valencia and California College of the Arts.