MEET ME BEYOND - PART 1

Synopsis   **A church is extended through a digital interface, connecting the earthly to the divine. With mixed reality, procedural algorithms, and artificial intelligence, new perspectives emerge around spirituality and human consciousness.**

Description   Meet Me Beyond – Part 1 is an immersive experience originally presented at DIGITAL ARTS ZURICH (DA Z) 2024. The site-specific mixed reality installation, hosted inside a church, aimes to connect visitors of all ages with their inner selves and explore the intersections of technology and spirituality.

Utilizing mixed reality, procedural algorithms, and artificial intelligence, new perspectives unfold on the interplay of spirituality and human consciousness. The installation addresses questions such as: Can technology convey, generate, or reproduce spiritual experiences? How can digital environments influence the sense of intimacy in spiritual exploration? Can AI serve as a spiritual mediator, and how might this change our perception of guidance?

AI models used for real time questions and answers: Claude 3.5 Sonnet (Anthropic). For lyrics, music, and voice: GPT-4o (OpenAI), Suno 3.5, Eleven Multilingual v2 (ElevenLabs).

Bio   Simon Husslein is a Zurich based director and producer combining more than twenty years of experience in art, design, scenography, and interior architecture. He graduated from the Royal College of art in 2007 and has worked in London, Tokyo, and Shanghai for various international clients, receiving numerous international awards. In 2023, he co-founded BEYOND.PLACE, a laboratory that creates pioneering experiences for spatial computing.

Arne Magold is a German director and creative technologist using the latest real-time technologies and AI for his innovative work in the field of mixed and virtual reality. With a foundation in mathematics and engineering he works in the field of human-machine-interaction and procedural generation of geometry and motion. In 2023, he co-founded BEYOND.PLACE, a laboratory that creates pioneering experiences for spatial computing.

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Reflection
Zurich
11/2024

Embracing New Technology
For most visitors, mixed reality was a novel experience, which fueled their curiosity and openness. It was rewarding to see them embrace this new form of technology and interact with the installation in such an intuitive, thoughtful way.

The Power of Personal Reflection
For many, the exhibition provided a profound opportunity for introspection, allowing them to experience true contemplation and deep, spiritual feelings. We were particularly moved by the expressions of gratitude from visitors who felt they had made meaningful connections to themselves.

Questions Over Answers
One of the key elements of the installation was the use of questions, rather than advice or preaching. This approach was highly appreciated by visitors, as it enabled them to reflect on their personal beliefs and themes in a way that was authentic and meaningful to them.

Where Technology Meets Human Experience
The playful, intuitive interface we developed for answering questions—where visitors selected one of two answers with each hand—worked seamlessly, enhancing the experience. The interaction of floating, dancing text added a lightness and joy, contributing to the success of the installation.

Bridging Virtual and Physical Worlds
Equally well-received was the ability to navigate between mixed reality and virtual reality. Visitors had full control over how much time they spent in each space, creating a truly personalized journey through the experience. The ease of this self-explanatory interaction was a major highlight.

Blending Realities
The installation included a mix of highly immersive, abstract virtual environments, as well as fragmented scans of the actual church. This blend of digital and real-world elements encouraged visitors to question the boundaries between physical reality and digital experience.

Seamless AI Integration
Our integration of live AI connection, with each headset linked via Wi-Fi, worked flawlessly. With a manageable bandwidth, the system maintained stable performance, allowing for smooth and immersive engagement with the questions and content.

Looking Ahead
We are excited about the potential of technology to create spaces of reflection, connection, and spiritual exploration, and are looking forward to seeing how these kinds of immersive experiences can continue to foster personal insights and new ways of engaging with the world.

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Deborah Desirée Meyer

Excerpt of the Master's thesis presented to the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences of the University of Zurich: 'Towards an Analytical Framework of Techno-Aesthetics: Appraising Immersive Experiences of New Media Art' by Deborah Desirée Meyer.

The work *Meet Me Beyond - Part 1* (2024) by the postdigital art duo, Simon Husslein and Arne Magold, consists of a mixed reality interface on the theme of spirituality. It is a site-specific work created for the Wasserkirche in Zurich, Switzerland. Viewers are asked individualized questions in its AR environment, aiming to prompt self-reflection and generate a personalized abstract. This is expanded by seven virtual realities. The work invites an exploration on the interactions between spirituality, human consciousness, and technology.

Materiality: The *technical* components of the work include a VR headset and external headphones. In the virtual environments, artificial intelligence is used to generate texts and chants, based on religious and nonreligious sources. Questions are generated with Claude, formulated into song lyrics with ChatGPT 4, and into complete songs with Suno. A photogrammetry app is used to create a scan of the Wasserkirche. The results are combined into a mixed reality environment.

The site-specific work is *integrated* into the central space of the Wasserkirche. Several chairs line the walls on both sides of the room.

The *formal features* of the work can be divided into four parts of the immersive experience. First, the viewer is welcomed into the experience while sitting on a chair on the left side of the room. This VR consists of a dark space with a flickering flame, accompanied by an auditory welcome message. The only point of spatial orientation is granted by the flame, positioned at a depth of approximately 1-2 meters.

The VR then fades to open up the AR environment, showing the interior of the church, filled with flames and lights that float around the space. A question moves around the space, twisting around itself. In the center of the room, a gray, circular orb sits at eye level. Oriented circularly around this orb are six more orbs. One of these, closest to the front of the church, is circular and black. The others form disjointed geometric shapes, all black with colored patterns, such as red, orange, brown, blue, or multicolored. On both ends of the space, a pair of hands vertically point down, opening inwards. These hands, in black color and notable size, demarcate the space of interaction.

When entering into the orbs, individual VR environments become visible. These create a particular atmosphere in an abstract place. They are primarily dark environments, including colored patterns and shapes, flames, rock-like structures, and elements of water. One of

the orbs depicts the shapes of door frames of religious buildings. Another orb depicts a scan of the church interior, through which the viewer slowly moves upward through a hole in its ceiling. The same environment continuously builds on itself, alternating between the standard spatial orientation of the church, and an upside down perspective. Each orb is accompanied by an atmospheric song.

To finalize the experience, the viewer sits down on the right side of the church, getting immersed in the same VR environment to begin with. A personalized abstract is read to the viewer, based on their answers to the questions integrated into the AR environment.

The depth and perspective of each space is dependent on the viewer's individual movement. While the composition of the main AR environment (orbs and hands) is symmetrically balanced, the motion of the text stimulates the viewer's continuous reorientation. The scale of this environment is equal to that of the real church. Within the orbs, orientation is granted only in relation to the abstract shapes.

Interactivity: The modes of interaction given by the space are those of sitting, walking, and standing. The viewer is asked to sit down at the start and end of the experience (in VR), can freely walk around the central space of the church in AR, and remains standing still within the individual VR orbs. While the viewer is provoked to move by the incoherently floating text, they are not dictated to walk in a predetermined direction. The space of interaction is delimited by the chairs on the right and left, and hands on the ends of the church. Full range of motion is granted while immersed, due to the practical liberty of the VR headset from wires, and the viewer's visibility of the church in AR.

The viewer can exert control over the environment by use of two gestures. This allows them to answer the questions presented in space. As the viewer sticks out their hands with the palms facing upwards - reflecting the gesture of the hands demarcating the space - an answer to the question appears in each palm. By sticking out one hand towards the question, it will be answered respectively, and a new question will appear. The viewer acts within limited parameters of interaction, yet their answers directly inform the generation of the next question, and the final outcome of their abstract. Their interaction thus builds a narrative, unfolding itself through a continuous ''conversation.'' Their influence functions on a primarily philosophical, rather than aesthetic level.

Embodiment: The initial immersion in an almost completely dark virtual reality created a moment of pause. It established a heightened awareness of my embodied conception of self, resulting from a loss of its visual appearance. A stark contrast was felt between my focused internal existence, and its interaction with the outside world, in the soon following AR environment. While the space was negotiated with other viewers, its discovery remained a solitary endeavor. One is at once confined within the self by auditory isolation from the physical

environment, yet aware of its visual adaptation. Immediately drawn to the floating question, I engaged in an interaction with its continually changing form, twisting and turning around the words as they were twisting around the space. Yet just as difficult as the questions were to read, they were to answer. A rational approach to understanding their demands seemed ineffective, instead calling for a more abstract level of thinking. The spiritual nature of the questions referred to the nature of the self and its relation to the wider world. I was inclined to walk aimlessly around the space in order to gather clarity of understanding. On the one hand, I felt like I did not know myself at all. On the other, this emphasized the complexity of human nature. Faced with polar opposite answers in the palms of your hands, how do you delimit the understanding of self to one domain or the other? Providing such answer required an openness to contemplation, which was inevitably supplanted by the intuition to *feel* what is right. Grappling with these questions for an extended period of time, a smooth transition into the abstract places of the orbs, provided a stark and comforting contrast. In a place without demands, my conception of self seemed to solidify. Rather than thinking about the body, its understanding was rooted in feeling.

The personal perception that primarily influenced this experience of the work is my lack of spiritual proximity. While approaching the work with an openness to answer the questions, and a willingness to answer them truthfully, there remained an underlying skepticism. This is presumably shaped by my lack of spiritual encounters and an understanding of the self as rooted in personal agency. Nonetheless, I believe value exists in questioning the self and one's environment. The abstract created based on my answers accurately reflects my self-conception. It implied a spontaneity, independence, and patience in ''follow[ing] no predetermined rhythm,'' ''walk[ing] in solitude,'' and being ''as the river that carves through mountains.'' The outcome of interacting with the work thus translates my embodied engagement with the work, into words. A generality to these statements may exist in the complexity of being and general reliance on spiritual themes such as water and order.

Experience of Immersion: The work *Meet Me Beyond - Part 1* (2024) f*unctionally* creates an immersive experience that is centered on the self and emphasized by the visual environment. Despite fostering an introspective zone of spiritual nature, the work maintains a religiously-neutral foundation. While religious elements such as the 7 orbs, open hands, upward ascension, sacred architectures, and the site-specificity of the church, are apparent, they relate to general symbols of worship.

In viewers with a spiritual connection, the work elicited highly emotional responses, some being brought to tears. These viewers expressed appreciation for this approach to spiritual thought. Ultimately, the work is meant to provide its viewers with neutral spiritual impulses and leave their responses open to a wide variety of interpretations.

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