



Life

I Visited the World's First Virtual LGBTQ Museum

The LGBTQ+ VR Museum is one example of queer people carving out their own space in an often hostile world.

MN by Matthew Neale

June 17, 2022, 9:55am



LGBTQ+ VR MUSEUM CREATOR ANTONIA FORSTER IN A VR HEADSET AND PATRICIA CRONIN'S SCULPTURE MEMORIAL TO A MARRIAGE IN . PHOTO: COURTESY OF FRASER AND PR

I'm standing in an undetermined liminal zone with a floating rainbow icon in front of me. Way beneath me is the Milky Way, a spectacular astral vista that renders our home galaxy an incidental detail in an ocean of stars. For once, this is not the result of a heroic dose of acid at a Pride afterparty, but the lobby of the world's first virtual reality LGBTQ museum.

Devised by Antonia Forster – activist, speaker, self-taught coder and once declared one of the most influential queer people in Bristol – the LGBTQ+ VR Museum offers a cultural exhibition based on contributions across the queer community, from the southwest of England to Denmark and Ghana. Each exhibit is made up of a 3D scan of a particular object and an accompanying voice message telling the story of its significance. It's here that a set of nail polish becomes an act of defiance, a karaoke microphone an avatar for proxy community and a carefully mislaid copy of James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* a bid to be discovered and seen.

Forster's museum began life, like so many moments of cultural watershed, when she simply couldn't find one anywhere else. "I kept thinking: 'Surely someone's done this?'" she tells me from a café in Brislington, Bristol. But they hadn't. As it transpired, there was no dedicated LGBTQ+ museum in the UK at the time (Queer Britain has since opened its doors as a physical museum, where Forster's project will be making an appearance in July). So she made one.

As well as bringing together community, the project was intensely personal too. After being asked to speak at a TEDxTalk event in 2017, Forster realised the talk would constitute coming out to her family as bisexual and polyamorous. Most of the conversations did not go well; some, she says, devolved into blackmail, bribery and threats. "I was given that choice very explicitly: 'We'll continue to support you, but only if you stay in the closet.' And I didn't want to do that," she says. "So my strategy was to become a software engineer."

The move provided Forster with the knowledge and resources to access and create virtual worlds – and now, the freedom to give back to her community. Thomas Terkildsen was one of a wave of contributors who responded to a call-out on social media, and it quickly became apparent that his background in VR development opened up possibilities for more in-depth collaboration on the project.

"I knew it was a massive undertaking for one person – in hindsight it has been a huge project for two people trying to do it while also working full-time jobs," he says. "I remember going on school trips to museums where I saw paintings of men and women being in love. I never saw any artworks telling stories of men loving men. I'm sure it would have helped me find myself if that sort of representation existed. And now it does."



THE INTERIOR OF THE LGBTQ+ VR MUSEUM. PHOTO: COURTESY OF PR

Stepping inside the museum, the experience of entering an alternate reality transcends the technical beauty of its pristine surfaces and colourful exhibits. It's my first time using a Meta Quest 2 headset, and its immersive quality is certainly sufficient to convince me I'm about to fall off the step to the garden outside on more than one occasion. But what's truly remarkable is the sense of occupying a queer space which isn't a temporary loan, when LGBTQ+ events are so often stuffed into straight-leaning dive bars, standard art venues, or otherwise makeshift DIY affairs. It's a dedicated space, and one that you realise the UK is severely lacking after the headset comes off.

Some people have waited longer than others for these moments. New York-based artist Patricia Cronin contributed a virtual rendition of the marble statue she created in 2002; titled *Memorial to a Marriage*, it depicts Cronin and her partner Deborah locked in an embrace to mark their love after death, at a time when they couldn't marry. It remains the world's first and only marriage equality monument. "The challenge of this work was to strike a balance between a high level of formal execution and pointed political protest," she can be heard explaining in the museum. "What I couldn't have in life, I would have forever in death."

Speaking to Cronin 20 years on, now happily married to Deborah, she still sees a frustrating lack of visibility for lesbians and the wider LGBTQ+ community. As ever, the problems are intersectional: For a Bristol-based project launched in the same year the Colston statue-topplers were cleared, the question of who owns public spaces and how they decide what gets displayed in them is more relevant than ever.



AN EXHIBIT IN THE LGBTQ+ VR MUSEUM. PHOTO: COURTESY OF PR

“I rarely see my reflection in white male heterosexual patriarchal culture. When I do see it, lesbians are usually the butt of a joke in a movie trailer or in pornography designed by and for straight men,” Cronin says. “So, in addition to not seeing women honoured in public monuments and same-sex marriage being illegal in the US at the beginning of the 21st century, I decided to imagine a world where misogyny and homophobia didn’t exist.”

Cronin says she’s still giving her friends the same advice she was in 2002: “If you want permanent public art, you’ve got to buy the land.” But she’s not holding her breath. “I refuse to wait for the outside world, local and federal municipalities, nor the culture from the art world to Hollywood to validate me. I’ll do it for myself, thank you. I have the radical imagination to reject my absence and insist on my presence with dignity.”

This could be where virtual reality steps in to carve out new spaces beyond this stuffy, heteronormative dimension. While the fight for queer rights continues IRL, more and more projects are springing up (including Minecraft’s groundbreaking Uncensored Library) that provide an opportunity to imagine what the future might look like elsewhere. Then again, as the metaverse expands, “elsewhere” may become an increasingly nebulous concept.

The reaction so far has been everything you’d expect from the internet. “The two pieces of criticism I tend to get when I do queer activism are either ‘we don’t need this because queer people are treated equally’ or ‘go die of AIDS,’” Forster says. “And I’m like, well, one kind of disproves the other, right?” The tech industry itself isn’t totally inclusive, either. “It’s its own echo chamber because it’s a skewed demographic. I don’t know the statistics about queer people, but there’s fewer women in tech, as an example, and so it can be harder for women just by virtue of the fact that there are fewer of them.”

Nonetheless, the museum is turning out to be something of an international success. This month the project won the New Voices Award at Tribeca Festival in New York, where the experience has been augmented by a biometric element – the user wears a device with electrodes that can measure heart rate and skin conductivity, which translates into emotional arousal and engagement with the content. In October, Forster and her team will be working with the Danish consulate in New York to stage a New York version of the museum, set to exhibit at the High Line.

Antonia Forster
@AntoniaRForster

Today was MANIC (apologies if I owe anyone a reply). But it works!

Each user's emotional arousal (heart rate and skin conductivity) drives the VFX. This portrait is then steamed into the LGBTQ+ VR museum - AND the user sees their emotions as subtle sparkles through the space. ✨

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For Forster, an avowed fan of *Dungeons & Dragons* and LARPing, other worlds aren't just out there to be discovered – they can be built. And they don't need to operate by the same rules. “I think we're very locked into ideas of what the world can be, and they're very narrow and limited, based on the limited view of our society now, in this era, in the western world,” she says. “The idea of VR to me was actual sorcery – and it still is. I can create anything I can imagine with nothing. It's pure magic, pure conjuration.”

LGBTQ+ VR Museum is currently exhibiting at Tribeca Festival 2022 until the 19th of July.

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