

# *Whist:* Dance theatre and Virtual Reality

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Whist* blends art installation, 360° interactive film, and physical theatre to experiment with a new form of storytelling inspired by the emergence of Virtual Reality (VR) technology.

A room holds beautifully designed objects, but it is only with a VR headset, the hidden, collateral stories of a strange family are unveiled.

Inspired by Freud's case studies, it explores "unconsciousness" on two levels:

- a) Multiple narratives about unconsciousness told through physical theatre and film; and
- b) the audiences' own unconscious decision-making process captured through gaze-based navigation made possible in VR technology.

## 2. CONCEPT

The theme that we want to explore in *Whist* is "unconsciousness". How does one come to become who he or she is now? What are the hidden aspects in one's personalities, ready to be unearthed? How do the audience members get to know a little bit of *their* individual personalities when they come to the show?

We are fascinated by the capability of technology to extend the bodily, visceral experience that we as experience as dancers in performances to the audience members.

Our recent work has been creating immersive environments to provoke audience's multiple senses such as *Kinbaku* ([www.aoiesteban.com/kinbaku-2015-1/](http://www.aoiesteban.com/kinbaku-2015-1/)) and *The Waldorf Project* ([www.aoiesteban.com/home#/the-waldorf-project-chapter-three/](http://www.aoiesteban.com/home#/the-waldorf-project-chapter-three/)). The immersive capability of VR technology naturally caught our eyes, and we imag-

ined an audience journey that could only be made possible by that technology.

A common challenge that filmmakers face is to figure out how to tell stories beyond the 90° angle with conventional cameras, whilst this is something we do as theatre-makers everyday. On the other hand, the challenges that we as dance company faces are the costliness of touring (bringing dancers, technicians, set and sound on the road) and yet dance audience is not as large as theatre, music or comedy. With VR, the barrier is significantly much lower – headsets could be sent remotely, and it would entice someone to experience the art form close up.

With a strong vision, new potentials and existing challenges, we set out the quest on creating *Whist*.

## 3. EXECUTION

The first phrase of *Whist* is the production of the film.

Happy Finish, a global creative production house and expert in utilising VR in commercial contexts, is our technology partner for this project. They provided a producer, a filmmaker and all necessary equipment for the filming.

Our performers were three highly experienced dancers with a portfolio career of working with key figures within contemporary dance and physical theatre such as Punchdrunk, Akram Khan, and Wim Vandekeybus/Ultima Vez.

We followed a traditional filmmaking process – to write a script, storyboard, cast, scout locations, create the film set, and shoot.

We considered aspects that were common in filmmaking, such as ensuring footages that were to

be captured would have already taken into account all creative possibilities such as digital special effects that we might apply during the film's post-production.

We also applied the three-dimensionality of (immersive) theatre making into each step. There were depth and height in our storyboard, audience movement in the script, locations that could be experienced in 360°, etc.

Specific decisions on camera movement were made based on artistic merit, as much as our consideration on issue of VR motion sickness.

The final outcomes that we are aiming for are:

- a) to make audiences' decision-making process invisible, an option unavailable in current state of immersive theatre where audience members normally explicitly choose which character or storyline to follow when there is an option.
- b) to have audiences experience dance theatre beyond the restrictions of four walls and reality, where digital gaming industry already has tried and tested solutions.

The demonstration that we will show at EVA London 2016 is a trailer of the film.

#### 4. SUMMARY

We continue to see the many artistic possibilities that we could take for this production and the potential of a new and exciting audience experience. As Shakespeare wrote, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women are merely players."

Our next steps are to complete post-production of the film, and to create the art installation (the second phase of the production). We continue to have Happy Finish on board, and designer James M. Shaw, composers Jozef van Wissem and Scott Gibbons are committed to the next phase. We are now fundraising and gathering financial and in-kind resources to complete the project. Once the production has been completed, we anticipate an international tour to show the work in theatres and galleries.

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