

Ecstasy: Walking to Mindful Awareness

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Abstract

This paper explores the sense of self in VR mediated environments through a virtual walking meditation practice that is controlled by one's own physiological data.

Virtual Meditations and the Self

VR (Virtual Reality) technology offers at least two affordances that are important for creating a sense of "presence" for the immersant: immersion and interaction. While a sense of immersion can rely on many factors, stereoscopic displays ranging from head-mounted displays to entire walls are essential. Interaction strategies typically allow the immersant to manipulate the virtual environment through varied interfaces. Secondary affordances, such as spatialized sound, are also used to enhance a sense of immersion. However, many factors -- such as lag time and optical distortions -- affect proprioceptive and vestibular systems (De Boeck, Raymaekers, & Coninx, 2006). The result hinders the experience; leaving an immersant feeling displaced within the virtual environment (Song, 2009). Such displacement can profoundly affect an immersant's consciousness of their body schema (Gromala, 2000). This raises an important question about how one relates to the self within these virtual environments, as body schema in turn affects one's sense of self.

Building upon prior work, we seek to compare sitting meditation with walking meditation, and how being in motion may affect an immersant's sense of self. The new work-in-progress is a fully immersive walking meditation application using VR and biofeedback technologies. Meditators walk on a treadmill through virtual landscapes, while real-time feedback of their physiological states alter

the media. In secular terms, meditation is a practice that requires a focus on body and mind, and may result in enhanced awareness. In terms of traditions lasting millennia, meditation is also a method of seeking truth or understanding, of trying to discover the nature of existence and of the human mind. (Tulku, 1977, p. 70) According to Kabat-Zinn, walking meditation is another door into the same room as sitting, lying down, or standing meditation. The spirit and orientation are the same, but the scaffolding is slightly different because meditators are moving (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p.268). In contrast to sitting meditation, meditators are much more aware of their own bodies and the environment since their bodies are in constant motion, making walking mediation a much more intense practice.

This comparison promises to be a good platform for further exploring experiences of the self in VR environments since using one's physiological states to achieve a state of mindful awareness poses many challenges to the self - even in the non-VR world.

References

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