

VIRTUAL REALITY AND THE FUTURE OF PEACEMAKING

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Summary

- Virtual reality (VR) is a transformative technology with massive potential to aid in mediation and peace processes. Given its relative novelty and limited application to date, VR has yet to be investigated as a tool for the mediation of armed conflict. In order to shed light on this issue, this paper builds on 30 expert interviews with international mediation and VR experts.
- Parties in armed conflict need strong support in breaking down the entrenched confrontational narratives that perpetuate the conflict. VR holds unique potential for conflict parties to participate in fully immersive perspective taking.
- In the mediation of armed conflict, VR technology could be used for conflict parties to better understand the consequences of the conflict on non-combatants, to witness the mediated dialogue from a different visual perspective, and to learn about other peace processes in an engaging and interactive format.
- In deciding whether to introduce VR into a mediated process, factors such as trust, understanding, mandate, time, VR expertise, confidentiality, and consent must be thoroughly evaluated by the mediation team.
- Potential obstacles to the application of VR in peace processes include mediators' current lack of proficiency in the usage of VR, conflict parties' resistance to it, or their low level of technological understanding. Risks involve the possibility of creating further psychological harm or causing negative physical reactions.
- The international peacemaking community must continue investigating how VR (and other disruptive technologies) can be harnessed to create more durable peace in the world. Partnerships with technology developers and academic researchers should be fostered in pursuit of this mission.



Introduction: Virtual reality and the future of peacemaking

When conflict parties engage in armed hostilities, their conflict narrative and supporting experiences become their outstanding reality. For mediators, trying to shift harsh confrontational logic and entrenched beliefs relating to the conflict can be a long and relentless process, filled with numerous potential setbacks and threats to a successful outcome.

As a visually, auditory, and movement immersive medium, virtual reality (VR)^[1] offers the peacemaking field transformative opportunities unparalleled to date. Notably, it provides a unique capacity for the sharing of perspectives. VR could bring the buried reality of a conflict to the forefront of dialogue, creating greater opportunity for leading conflict actors (e.g. conflict party leaders and representatives) to experience a mindset shift.

As the makers and breakers of peace, conflict leaders and appointed representatives need strong support in working through the psychological roots and causes of the conflict. If they refuse to acknowledge the existence of opposing perspectives, they will have little chance of creating the conditions for long-term peace. A continued confrontational and single-minded attitude will be perceived and mimicked by their followers, limiting the likelihood of an end to conflict. As one international mediation expert^[2] expressed in an interview as part of this research, 'If you [a conflict party] cannot take the perspective of the other or begin to take their perspective, or understand how they perceive you, you will never be able to resolve the conflict.'

Through immersion in another's reality, conflict parties^[3] may become more willing to share their personal perspectives and emotions, and be more open-minded to new ideas. They may also reach a deeper understanding of what might satisfy the other parties, and be more likely to present proposals that would be mutually acceptable. Through this shift in mindset, conflict parties could see

beyond the self-perpetuating conflict narrative and start to create a new peaceful dialogue together.

In practice, VR has immense potential to be used for perspective taking and sharing^[4] – in parallel to mediation talks – including with top-level decision makers in informal situations, with mid-range leadership in mediations or dialogues, and with community leaders in peacebuilding and problem-solving activities (so-called tracks 1.5, 2, and 3).^[5]

The unique value of VR has been observed through its application in a small number of peace-promoting and awareness-raising projects around the world. A standout example is Meet the Soldier, a VR project led by Q42, a strategic Dutch technology agency, and Mensen met een Missie, a Dutch peace and justice organisation. To date, Meet the Soldier is the most prominent instance of VR being used as a support tool in a real-world peacebuilding initiative between individuals with a history of armed conflict. More specifically, it allowed two feuding Ugandan tribal leaders the opportunity to use VR to view each other's homes and to see their families and friends without having to travel extended distances or fear for their safety, intrinsic to a similar in-situ experience.^[6]

In combination with peacebuilding workshops, seminars and facilitated discussion, this VR experience in Uganda and its resulting documentary allowed the two tribal leaders to humanise the other and begin to build a positive relationship. Now, several years later, 'the two warriors are good friends', according to the local parish priest.^[7] If applied to similar conflicts, this usage of VR could lower the security risks associated with opposing leaders exchanging visits, while allowing the mediating entity to retain full control over the situation.

Implementing VR in the mediation of armed conflict

The following three points outline how mediators could use VR to further engage conflict parties in:

- Understanding conflict consequences on non-combatants
- Adopting a different perspective
- Learning lessons from other conflicts^[6]

Understanding conflict consequences on non-combatants

VR provides a unique opportunity to share specific realities and human stories from all sides of the conflict. Though senior leaders or representatives are often aware of the theoretical or statistical impact of the conflict on non-combatants, they may be physically, mentally, or emotionally removed from the reality of the hostilities. By focusing on individual non-combatants, it may be more likely for the conflict parties to experience compassion or empathy, and to take positive action to limit negative externalities.

Through VR, conflict party leaders and representatives could hear from those non-combatants directly affected by the conflict, without the parties having to travel, worry about safety, or disclose any compromising personal details. Furthermore, all conflict parties would be able to have identical experiences, mitigating concerns of transparency and fairness.

This endeavour could be undertaken utilising 360-degree video, an accessible and cost-effective way to visually immerse a user in another person's reality. In this manner, the mediation team could use the non-combatants' stories and daily hardships to inform the mediation process.

In practice, non-combatants could be filmed speaking directly to the 360-degree camera, sharing the honest reality of their life under armed conflict. When viewing it in VR, the technology would stimulate the experience of the conflict parties being in the same physical space as the non-combatant, amplifying the parties' ability to understand the non-combatant's perspective and perhaps inspiring compassion or empathy for them.

A follow-up experience could allow the conflict parties to see life through the non-combatant's eyes as they go about their daily life. A video of this perspective could be attained by placing two 180-degree cameras on the front and back of a helmet worn in-situ by the non-combatant to impart a feeling of visual embodiment to the viewer.^[9]

Filming could either be conducted independently by the mediation team with the consent of all parties affected, or in conjunction with the conflict parties themselves. The granting of consent by the conflict parties could even be framed as a

confidence-building measure. Due to technical difficulty and potential privacy concerns relating to the non-combatants, production and editing of the VR content should be conducted by the mediation team alone.

According to a VR expert, when using this type of technology to tell stories, 'you have to connect to the people. The surroundings are less important'. Another expert stated that it would be best to take an 'ethnographic approach' and to 'use the camera as an eye'. Furthermore, no voice-overs, music, or special effects should be used, so as to preserve the integrity of the experience for the conflict parties.

Discussing similar ideas with mediation experts, they shared that VR could help 'present the reality the other party is seeing'. One expert noted that it could be helpful for conflict parties in 'putting faces to suffering', especially as the medium excels at capturing the entirety of a scene. Another explained that VR could help parties 'to visualise humanitarian issues, which may invoke a degree of empathy in parties'. If compassion or empathy is achieved, parties may be more open to discussing or taking action on humanitarian issues.

Adopting a different perspective

Visual perspectives can have a tremendous impact on how we, as humans, perceive and process a situation. By replaying a mediated discussion back from the mediator's physical point of view, the conflict parties have the capacity to adopt a different perspective of the dialogue, thereby gaining greater insight about themselves and the other parties present.

From a technical point of view, as previously stated, this method could be achieved by filming a short mediated discussion in which the mediator wears a helmet with two 180-degree cameras on top. After stitching the videos together to form one 360-degree video, all parties could watch the session back in VR headsets from the visual perspective of the mediator.

Through this exercise, each conflict party could gain a better sense of how they are perceived by others in both their verbal and non-verbal communication. For instance, are they less reasonable in their statements than they thought? Do they come off as more aggressive in their body language than they intend? Furthermore, by taking the perspective of a different party, it may be easier to listen and process what is being said by others. In this manner, parties to the conflict could gain greater understanding of others' positions and needs.

Consent regarding the filming of the dialogue must be fully negotiated with all parties prior to this exercise. It is recommended that the video be deleted from all systems in the presence of the conflict parties following the debrief of the

exercise, to preserve the parties' information security, privacy, and trust in the process.

Learning lessons from other conflicts

VR could also serve as a positive medium by which parties in conflict could gain insights into how other groups in conflict have reached agreement in a similar context. Parties could virtually be transported to another (post-) conflict setting, meet the key actors in that conflict, learn about its causes, the evolution of the mediation process, and the implementation of any reached agreements.

In practice, this could be done through either a 360-degree video that conflict parties watch in VR headsets, or as an interactive video experience that allows parties to control the progression and pace of the experience, such as allowing users to pick the order in which they meet and learn about key characters. Engaging with other perspectives and real-life experiences could prompt the parties to further reflect on their own

situation and to apply lessons learned from the other conflict. Ideally, this would help to re-invigorate the process by helping the parties see the possibility for a positive outcome.

To limit time and resource expenditure, the mediation community could develop a standard set of virtual experiences about past peace processes that any mediator of armed conflict could keep in their back pocket until the perceived need arises.

In a number of interviews, mediation experts noted that the 'fun' aspect of the technology may help in its success with parties. In the words of one expert, 'VR mode is even better [than standard video], as [user] engagement with the scene becomes much more intense', heightening the cognitive and emotional impact. Although this activity could also be conducted using standard video, the novelty and excitement of using VR may help to bond the lead conflict actors on an interpersonal level, positively contributing to the development of peace.

Essential elements for incorporating VR into mediation

Prior to its application in the mediation of an armed conflict, the author urges additional formal testing of the technology in academic settings or at local levels, where control and risk are managed closely. The following are critical aspects of VR that must be considered by a mediation team before introducing VR into the process.

Trust: Prior to the introduction of any new technology, the mediation team must develop a positive working relationship with each of the conflict parties, including a sufficient level of trust and transparency. According to mediation experts, trust in the mediator is a requisite factor for parties being willing to step outside their comfort zones.

Understanding: Parties to the conflict must know that the mediator has a genuine understanding of their positions and why those positions are held. Otherwise, any attempt at enhancing or encouraging perspective taking among the parties will be perceived as biased and manipulative.

Mandate: VR should be considered for use once the mediation team determines that the outcome would benefit from taking a deeper dive into the conflict parties' relationship, into the underlying causes of the conflict, or into its impact on society. This application requires time and the willingness of the parties to participate. These conditions are most

commonly found when the parties sitting at the table are seeking a durable end to the conflict.

Time: The more sophisticated the virtual experience in technology and design, the more time and resources it will take to produce. As a result, processes that require rapid decision-making and action, such as ceasefire negotiations, are likely not suitable for VR application.

VR expertise: Designing, creating, and running VR experiences for conflict parties necessitates expertise not found within the mediation profession to date. VR filmmakers and experience creators should be recruited as consultants or in-house experts to fill this knowledge gap.

Confidentiality: Using VR with conflict parties would be best in a confidential and private setting, as it would lower the risk of backlash that party leaders or representatives may face from their constituencies or the public if they deviate from their group's stance. This is especially relevant when conflict parties participate in VR activities that encourage perspective taking or emotional disclosure. In higher-level negotiations, this makes VR most suitable to be implemented informally, separate from official talks.

Consent: Before deciding to use VR technology, it is recommended that each party to the conflict be allowed to interact with the technology without the other parties present. The final decision of whether or not to utilise the technology must be left to the conflict parties. Furthermore, it is the responsibility of the mediation team to ensure that

all parties to the conflict have a full understanding of the nature, intended purpose, and risks of using VR prior to doing so.

Constraints and risks

In the mediation context, potential hurdles to the use of VR include:

- mediators' lack of proficiency in VR,
- resistance from the conflict parties to use VR, and
- conflict parties' low technological understanding.

In addition, a top concern of introducing VR into mediation is creating additional psychological trauma or harm. For instance, if a VR user is encapsulated in a virtual environment that is too violent, shocking, or disturbing in nature, it may cause undue trauma for them that could lead to additional negative consequences.^[10] It is critical that VR content is deemed appropriate for each user prior to use. This can be accomplished through the use of individual screening questions created with the specific virtual experience in mind.

Negative physical reactions from participants is also a risk that should be considered. During a VR immersion, users could experience disorientation, dizziness, headaches, motion sickness, or even claustrophobia.^[11] However, due to technological improvements over the last three years, these risks have lessened significantly in new VR technologies.

In general, associated risks with VR can be limited with advance planning, including the creation of a technology risk management plan during the mediation preparatory stage, thorough education and preparation of the conflict parties, and individual and group debrief sessions following each VR exposure. Ultimately, as one mediation expert noted, 'The main challenge is human. We need to stop being afraid of technology.'

Conclusion

Imagine what could be accomplished if a conflict party could experience the world from their enemy's perspective, even for just a few minutes.

VR holds countless possibilities for the sphere of conflict resolution that need to be actively explored, tested, and refined. When it comes to technological use, the international mediation community has a responsibility to take charge of its future by

harnessing innovation. Going forward, it would be constructive for the community to partner with technology developers and academic researchers to explore how VR can be leveraged in peacemaking. Just as we ask parties in conflict to do, we as mediators must challenge ourselves to venture beyond our comfort zone to reap new rewards. With so much to offer, VR promises to be well worth the effort.

Endnotes

^[1] Virtual reality (VR) is an umbrella term that refers to an immersive digital experience that allows users to view or interact with two- or three-dimensional, 360-degree environments that are either real or fictional in nature. The aim of VR is to fully and realistically engage a user's senses so that they perceive the simulated reality to be real, and that their body is now present in it, despite cognitively knowing otherwise.

^[2] This essay utilises the author's original research from 30 expert interviews with both international mediation (17) and VR (13) experts. These interviews were conducted as part of the author's master's thesis on the topic. The identities of the experts are anonymous to protect their privacy.

^[3] Conflict party (or party to the conflict) is defined herein as an actor present at the mediation table, excluding the mediator and mediation team.

^[4] Perspective taking is defined herein as comprehending or imagining another's point of view, such as their thoughts and feelings, and reasoning about how the situation at hand relates to that point of view.

^[5] Government of Germany. Federal Foreign Office (2017) Basics of Mediation: Concepts and Definitions (Fact Sheet Series: Peace Mediation and Mediation Support) Available at http://www.peacemediation.de/uploads/7/3/9/1/73911539/basics_of_mediation_concepts_and_definitions.pdf [accessed 18 June 2020].

^[6] Teddy Cherim (2018) Meet the Soldier [film]. The Netherlands: Hack the Planet. Available at <https://meetthesoldier.com/watch> [accessed 18 June 2020].

^[7] Fr Paul Ngole, e-mail message to author, 19 September, 2019.

^[8] It is important to note that none of the ideas proposed herein have been tested in either academic or field settings.

^[9] In certain areas, this may not be possible due to safety concerns or cultural limitations.

^[10] Alsever J (2015) Is Virtual Reality the Ultimate Empathy Machine? *Wired*, 10 November. Available at <https://www.wired.com/brandlab/2015/11/is-virtual-reality-the-ultimate-empathy-machine/> [accessed 18 June 2020].

^[11] Humanitarian Leadership Academy (2019) Immersive Film Toolkit: A Guide to Creating Learning Experiences Through Immersive Media. Available at https://www.humanitarianleadershipacademy.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Toolkit_Immersive-Film.pdf [accessed 18 June 2020].

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