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Examining VR Exposure Therapy through Comprehensive Analysis and Innovative Solutions

Haweni Regaa, Advised by John Musgrave

Abstract

This study explores the use of Virtual Reality (VR) in exposure therapy for acrophobia by utilizing the Unity game engine to create immersive simulations that mimic high environments for therapeutic interventions. It evaluates the effectiveness of VR and user interaction in providing graduated virtual height exposures, focusing on design principles such as user comfort and presence. Through both quantitative and qualitative analyses, including feedback and usability tests, the study demonstrates VR's potential to enhance phobia treatment strategies, notably for fear of heights. The findings suggest that VR exposure therapy, supported by game engines like Unity, represents promising advancements in phobia treatment, offering a more accessible and engaging approach to therapy. This research contributes to the broader understanding of VR's role in mental health, proposing an integration of technology with traditional therapy methods.

Methodology

Participant Recruitment: Participants were chosen based on specific criteria to ensure their suitability for VR exposure therapy:

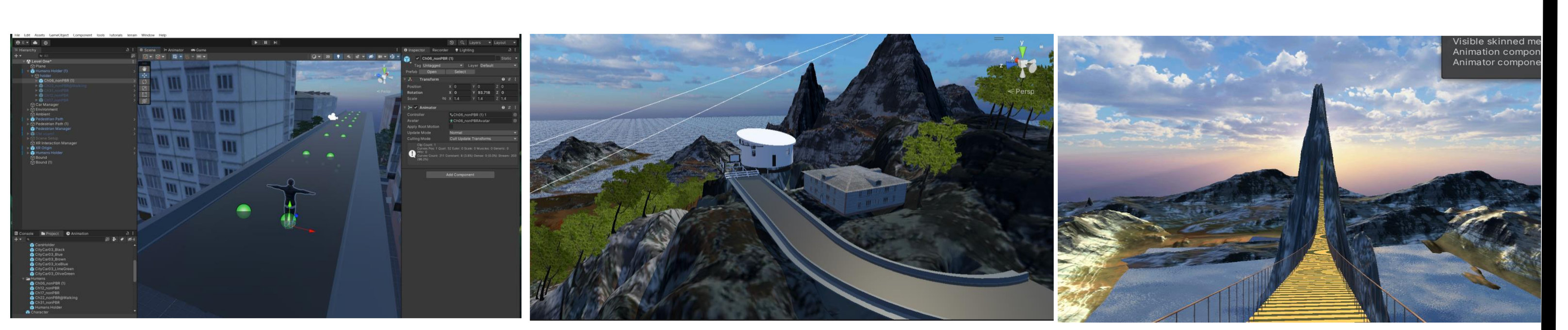
- Adults aged 18 to 65.
- No severe phobia of heights or history of VR-induced motion sickness.
- Limited prior exposure to VR to prevent familiarity bias.

VR Simulation Development

The simulations, developed with Unity, featured tiered environments that replicated varying degrees of heights, designed to gradually expose participants to their fear:

Design: Created multiple virtual environments, each depicting different altitudes, from ground-level perspectives to atop high structures.

Tiered Exposure: Environments were structured to progressively simulate higher altitudes, enabling a stepwise acclimatization process.



Level One Level Two Level Three

Figure 1: The tiered approach implemented to help assimilate to different levels of height

Simulation Interface

The Unity engine was employed to leverage existing assets to efficiently construct immersive experiences. The development process involved the following key stages:

Selection and Customization of Assets

Pre-designed assets from the Unity Asset Store were selected to build varied environments, which were crucial in simulating different heights for exposure therapy. This approach allowed for rapid prototyping and iteration, as assets could be easily integrated and customized within Unity. The focus was on ensuring these environments were diverse and realistic to effectively simulate scenarios that participants could encounter in the real world.

Integration and Scripting

With the chosen assets in place to reflect real-world scenarios for acrophobia triggers, custom scripting and scene configuration were pivotal in crafting interactive simulations that engaged participants in a controlled environment. Scripts were meticulously crafted to manage variables and interactive elements within the virtual space. This programming enabled a nuanced manipulation of the simulations, allowing for tailored adjustments in the complexity and intensity of each environment. Such precise control was essential for ensuring the integrity and scientific validity of the study's evaluations.

```
Unity Message | 0 references
private void OnTriggerEnter(Collider other)
{
    if (other.CompareTag("PausePoint"))
    {
        //pauses the pedestrian on its path
        Pause();
        //disables the look point so no other pedestrian can interact with it
        other.transform.gameObject.SetActive(false);
        //gets a random index for the look animation
        var randomLook = Random.Range(1, 4);
        //plays the look animation
        ActiveObject.GetComponent<Animator>().SetInteger("lookIndex", randomLook);
        //rotates the pedestrian to look in the direction of the look point
        transform.DOLocalRotate(other.transform.localEulerAngles, 0.1f).OnComplete(() => { ReturnToPath(); });
    }
}

1 reference
void ReturnToPath()
{
    //plays the return to path animation
    StartCoroutine(ReturnToPath());
    IEnumerator ReturnToPath()
    {
        //waits for the look animation to finish
        var animationTime = ActiveObject.GetComponent<Animator>().GetCurrentAnimatorStateInfo(0).length;
        print(ActiveObject.GetComponent<Animator>().GetCurrentAnimatorStateInfo(0).length);
        yield return new WaitForSeconds(animationTime);
        //resumes the pedestrian on its path
        ActiveObject.GetComponent<Animator>().SetInteger("lookIndex", 0);
        Resume();
    }
}
```

Figure 2: Code that controls the animations

Testing and Iteration

Testing phases were crucial to evaluate the realism and immersive quality of the simulations. Feedback from initial test users was gathered to refine the VR environments, ensuring they accurately represented the scenarios intended for the research. Adjustments were based on technical performance and user interaction data.

Final Implementation

The final step involved fine-tuning the VR simulations to optimize performance across different VR platforms and ensuring they were ready for deployment in therapeutic settings. This included performance optimizations to enhance the visual quality and interactivity without compromising the smooth operation on various VR devices.

Result Analysis

The results of the VR simulations, aimed at evaluating the immersive qualities for research purposes, provided insightful data on user experience and system performance.

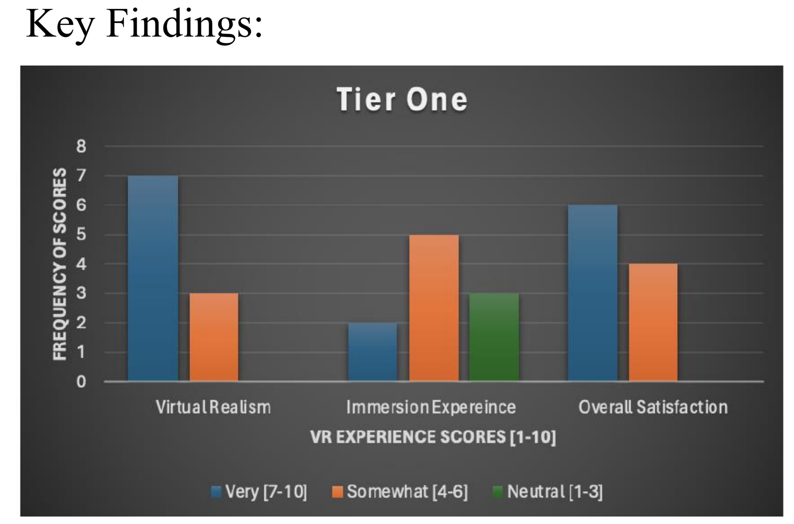
Participant Feedback

Participants reported a high level of immersion, with the majority indicating that the simulated environments felt convincingly real. Feedback highlighted the effective replication of altitude, which was essential for the study's aim to explore VR's capability to mimic real-world scenarios that might trigger acrophobic responses.

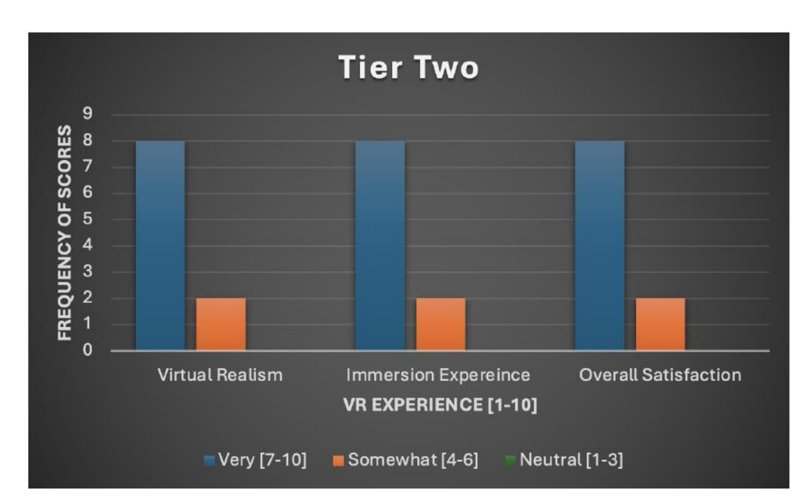
Quantitative Data

The effectiveness of the VR simulation was quantitatively assessed using a structured questionnaire. Participants rated aspects of the simulation on a scale from 1 to 10 across three tiers, reflecting increasing levels of virtual altitude and complexity.

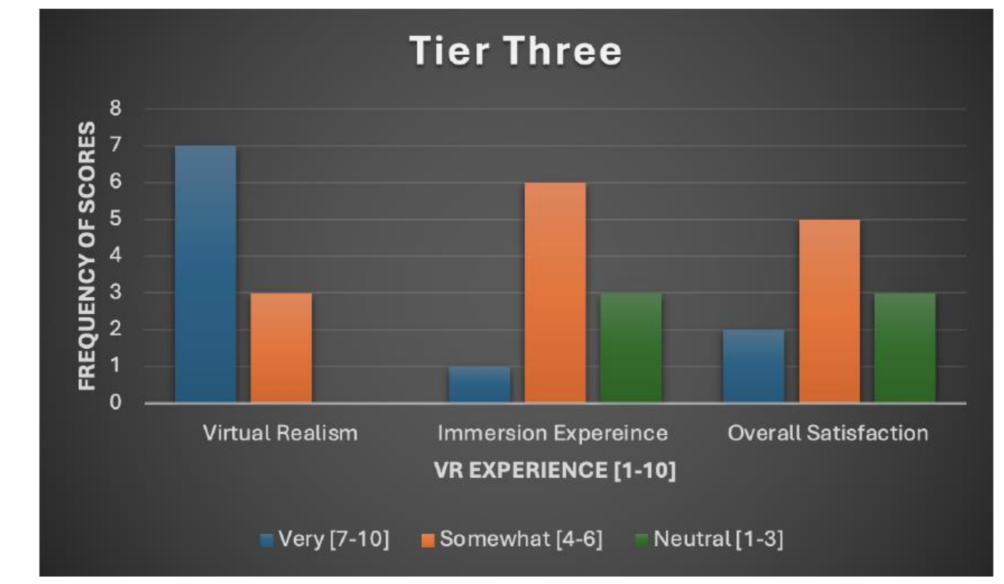
Key Findings:



The Tier One displayed high ratings for Virtual Realism and Immersion, indicating effective initial engagement. Although Overall Satisfaction varied, the trend favored positive responses, suggesting room for minor improvements.



Tier Two results showed high scores in Virtual Realism and Immersion, affirming a compelling VR experience. Satisfaction levels were generally high, though some reported neutral experiences.



The Tier Three graph shows a notable shift in the frequency of scores. Virtual Realism continues to score highly, but with an increased number of participants reporting neutral experiences. The Immersion Experience sees a balance between high and moderate scores. For Overall Satisfaction, the responses spread more evenly across the spectrum, suggesting a varied personal perception of the VR experience at this level.

Qualitative Data

Feedback revealed that realistic elements, such as the glass walkway in Tier Two, significantly heightened user immersion and the sense of presence. However, responses to increased realism varied, with some participants finding it exhilarating, while others felt discomfort.

In Tier Three, features like fog, simulating high-altitude visibility, had mixed effects on users. Some found it added to the experience, while others felt it reduced their sense of height.

Overall, the qualitative data underlined the importance of visual fidelity in VR simulations and its varied impact on user satisfaction and comfort.

Discussion

The tiered VR exposure study revealed:

- Level One: Served as a gentle introduction to virtual heights, successfully acclimating users without inducing discomfort, laying a foundation for more intense experiences.
- Level Two: Presented a more complex scenario with a glass walkway, receiving high marks for realism and immersion, though user satisfaction varied.
- Level Three: Introduced fog to simulate high-altitude conditions, leading to mixed feelings about immersion and realism.

Key Takeaways:

- User-Centered Design: User comfort is essential, with the study suggesting that future VR simulations should include adaptive features to cater to individual preferences.
- Multisensory Integration: Feedback pointed towards the potential benefit of incorporating multisensory elements to enhance the immersive experience.
- Realism vs. Comfort: A careful balance is needed between visual fidelity and user comfort to maximize engagement and minimize discomfort.

Conclusion

While revealing the potential of VR in exposure therapy, this study also recognized key limitations, particularly in graphics quality and motion options, which suggest directions for future enhancement. Despite these constraints, the tiered exposure approach proved effective, validating the method's potential for therapeutic applications and emphasizing the importance of a user-centered design.

The implications of this research are significant for mental health treatment, with VR's capacity to revolutionize therapeutic outcomes. Collaboration between tech developers, researchers, and clinicians is crucial for creating empirically validated tools tailored to patient needs. Future work should focus on improving graphical fidelity, interaction methods, and incorporating multisensory feedback for more personalized and immersive therapy experiences. This study lays groundwork for further innovation, aiming to unlock VR's full potential in supporting mental well-being.

References

[1] Albert Bandura. "Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change". In: Psychological Review 84.2 (1977), p. 191 (page 41).

[2] Debra Boeldt et al. "Using virtual reality exposure therapy to enhance treatment of anxiety disorders: identifying areas of clinical adoption and potential obstacles". In: Frontiers in psychiatry 10 (2019), p. 476694 (page 72).