Enhancing humanitarian learning through virtual reality

The Humanitarian Leadership Academy believes that enabling access to high-quality learning opportunities leads to more effective crisis preparation and response. **Atish Gonsalves** and **Anne Garçon** outline some exciting developments that harness technology to help with this

With the increase of disasters and humanitarian crises worldwide, the need for more engaging, scalable and effective humanitarian learning has never been greater. Building on recent trends in learning and development – such as a shift towards personalised learning, augmented and virtual reality (AR/VR), and gamification – as well as research from academia such as Stanford VHIL's use of VR in empathy building (https://vhil.stanford.edu), the Academy has started to explore the use of innovative learning methodologies to affect both empathy building and behavioural change among humanitarians.

As a medium, VR provides highly immersive experiences that can be used to enhance storytelling. These unique experiences give the user the feeling of being in another environment entirely, which can be especially useful when looking to offer new perspectives in sensitive situations and to establish or increase empathy. The Academy is currently testing two core types of VR experiences: interactive and non-interactive. One allows the user to be immersed passively in a situation or environment in 360 degrees; the other allows the user to interact with the environment – taking a personalised journey through the experience, influenced by their choices.

The Academy has been creating short immersive films since 2018. These have been designed to integrate with existing humanitarian courses on its free digital learning platform, Kaya, and portray different stakeholders' points of view in various humanitarian contexts. These immersive resources influence users' empathy and understanding – so for more than 150,000 humanitarian learners who have used Kaya, these resources offer an opportunity to relate more closely to a range of possible scenarios in a safe and supported space.

Our first film, *You Cannot Argue with a Flood*, immerses learners in the conflict-torn city of Marawi in the Philippines. Directed by award-winning documentary filmmaker Lauren Anders Brown, the film tells the story of Hanan, a young Filipina. When terrorists destroy her home, she becomes internally displaced, then suffers the consequences of a major typhoon. Hanan eventually finds recovery through volunteering and providing psychosocial support to other internally displaced people in the city. Available both in English and Tagalog, the film has been integrated within the Volunteer Essentials e-learning pathway on Kaya to help make the learning experience even more engaging and immersive.

In early 2019 the Academy developed *Gender in Conflict*, an immersive 360 documentary, available in both English and Arabic, which looks at how gender affects people during times of conflict,

Screenshot of Safeguarding Virtual Reality *experience*
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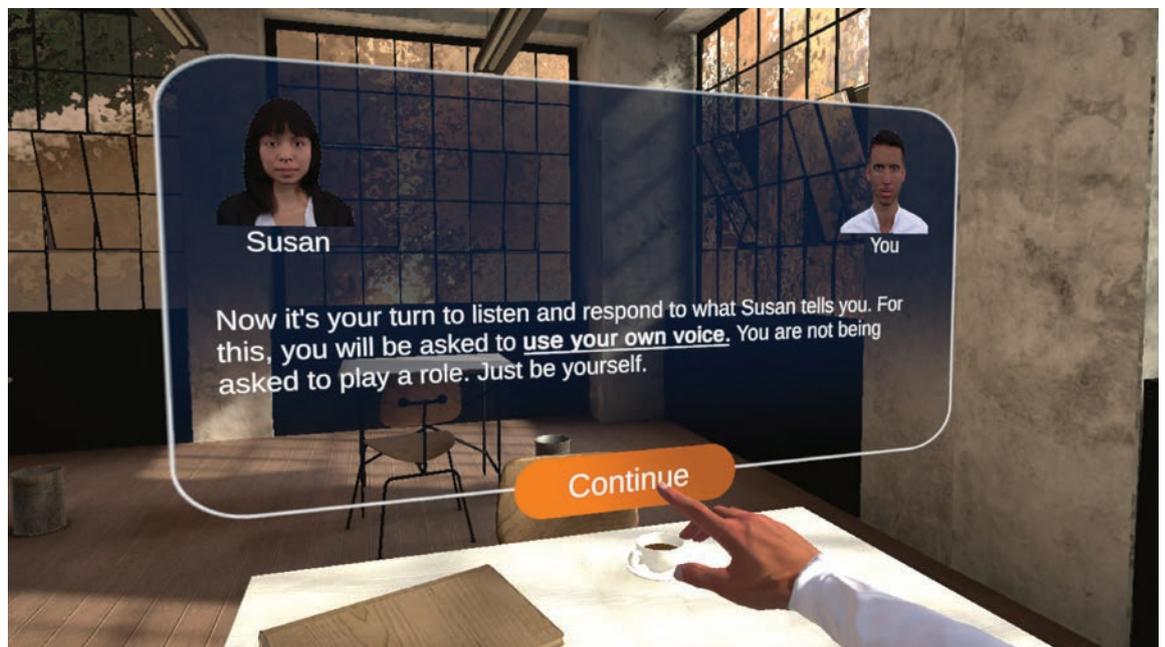
particularly in the context of the Syrian conflict. The documentary is narrated by both Syrian women and men, who share their stories and tell us how gender has played a role in their experience as refugees.

Camp 2029, another interactive experience, offers an immersive view of a virtual refugee camp set within a dystopian humanitarian future we must all work to avoid. Participants embody the role of a refugee as they navigate automated systems and commercial interests. The experience is not optimistic – the aim is to provoke thought around the unintended consequences of technology, and to work towards a future where there is opportunity, empowerment, and security for everyone.

Rohingya VR tells us the story of the Rohingya refugee crisis. In 2017-2018, escalating violence and discrimination in Myanmar's Rakhine State drove hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees across the border into Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. While the pace of this exodus made it the fastest growing refugee crisis in the world, the concentration of refugees in Cox's Bazar is among the densest worldwide. *Rohingya VR* presents first-hand accounts from this humanitarian crisis, from relief workers to refugees themselves.

The Academy has also created some immersive experiences that don't use virtual reality but instead focus on enhancing decision-making skills. *Ebola Choices* is an interactive film that allows viewers to relive decisions made by local volunteers during the 2014-2015 Ebola outbreak in Liberia. Using the same concept as Netflix's recent interactive film *Bandersnatch*, *Ebola Choices* allows viewers to choose between different options and experience the impact of these decisions during the Ebola crisis.

Abuse and exploitation

Building on these experiences, in late 2019, the Academy decided to focus on safeguarding. Recent events have highlighted an urgent need for improved safeguarding policies and practice within humanitarian and development organisations. NGOs have a responsibility to ensure that their staff, operations and programmes do no harm to children or vulnerable adults, nor expose them to abuse or exploitation.

In the wake of these recent events, donors and supporters are increasingly keen to see effective safeguarding provision and are likely to refuse funding for organisations that cannot demonstrate that they are training their staff effectively. Only by making safeguarding a priority, will we be able to regain the public's trust in humanitarian and development work. However, safeguarding is a subject for which few organisations have the suitable learning resources.

Conversations with survivors of exploitation and abuse can be challenging, and while traditional options to practise those conversations are available, they are often not scalable or emotionally engaging. Using cutting edge technology like VR as a form of training can transform safeguarding-related behaviour among aid workers and volunteers.

A collaboration between the Academy, Bodyswaps and a number of leading subject matter experts, *Safeguarding Virtual Reality* (*Safeguarding VR*) was conceived as an alternative for learners working in potentially difficult safeguarding scenarios to practise their soft skills, using the latest learning technology.

Safeguarding VR is a 20-minute real-time interactive learning experience developed to train aid workers on how to handle conversations with survivors of safeguarding incidents; the experience had its soft launch in November 2019. To reach the broadest number of humanitarians, *Safeguarding VR* can be experienced with a range of VR headsets from standalone solutions, such as Oculus Quest, to mobile devices combined with VR goggles, such as Google Cardboard. It is also a practical complement to a self-guided e-learning course which covers the essentials of safeguarding.

During the experience, the learner is tasked with engaging with the survivor of a safeguarding incident. Using their own voice and body language, the learner is given an opportunity to listen, ask questions and then provide a chosen intervention following the survivor's disclosure. The system then uses a virtual 'body swap' mechanism to allow the learner to relive the intervention from the survivor's perspective, giving them the opportunity to self-reflect on their choices throughout the experience. The system also provides feedback on the learner's specific behaviour, word choice and body language and makes personalised recommendations to help them improve their soft skills over time.

The initial results from the pilot have been very promising; 89 per cent of users reported looking to apply what they learned in the simulation to their work; and 71 per cent said they would recommend the experience to their colleagues. "The possibilities are limitless really; border control and negotiation for example, liaising with the local communities on how they can get a project going," says Julie Tailhan, Learning and Development Officer at Doctors Without Borders. Though the specific technology still has much room for improvement, the development of *Safeguarding VR* has illuminated many other possible applications for this kind of immersive training experience. In the years to come, the Academy hopes to trial similar interpersonal experiences around the subjects of conflict management, negotiation and gender bias.

In an age where technology is often seen as divisive and even threatening or dangerous – these new training experiences prove that technology can in fact be used to build empathy and bring about positive behavioural change across the humanitarian sector in a cost-effective way. **CRJ**

Screenshot of the Safeguarding VR experience. Learners engage with the survivor of a safeguarding incident and get feedback on their behaviour, word choice and body language
Humanitarian Leadership Academy & Bodyswaps

Authors

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■ *Find out more about the Academy's VR experiences at http://bit.ly/360VRfilms*
■ *Start the Academy's free online course on Safeguarding http://bit.ly/ SafeguardingEssentials*
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