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Field Notes: Sundance New Frontier 2022

On Sundance's social VR offerings and New Frontier projects "The Inside World," "Cosmogony," "Suga," and "Gondwana"

The virtual audience for Sam Green's **32 Sounds**, the opening night viewing experience from Sundance's New Frontier, held in the VR virtual cinema house on the Spaceship. Image courtesy of Sundance Institute

New Frontier was one of the first initiatives from a major film festival to seriously curate and explore VR, AR, and other interactive cinematic forms that we now group together under "the metaverse." That term entered the popular lexicon only recently, and the explosion of public interest in these subjects over the past year was the biggest, most tantalizing external factor weighing on New Frontier as the 2022 edition of the Sundance Film Festival approached.

Since it already had a firmly established VR component, Sundance was better-equipped than many to adapt to the challenges posed by Covid-19. But perhaps because it was anticipated until the last minute that 2022 would be a hybrid, mostly in-person event rather than online-only, there was less presentational innovation this year than in 2021. Early press releases hyped that the latest iteration of New Frontier would be an innovative "biodigital showcase." Having engaged with many of the series' VR experiences, I still am unsure what that means. The "Spaceship," the interactive online hub used both for accessing New Frontier programming and for virtual hobnobbing, was largely unchanged.

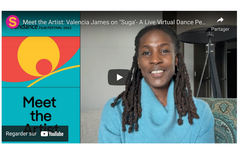
But then, vague terms are the vogue for emerging media, and it's difficult to separate the signal from the noise as hype builds for "Web3." Overall, though, that's not too different from the normal film festival experience, in which one must work to find the good stuff amidst a field of the bad-to-average. If anything, it's oddly comforting that this remains the standard even when you're browsing your laptop or strapping on a VR headset instead of hustling through Park City. The more things change, etc. Still, by now the section is established firmly enough in the Sundance institution to comfortably show off increasingly ambitious projects.

Some of the ambition is of the inescapably misbegotten sort. Sundance is a highly corporatized affair, so it's no shock that the NFT craze would manifest in some form here. New Frontier included meetup events devoted to asking with far too much credulity questions that can easily be refuted with a blunter "No." (*Will Web 3.0 result in new economies and new forms of governance? Are DAOs the new unions? Are smart contracts the new lawyers?*)

Surprisingly, only one New Frontier project involves NFTs, and it comes courtesy of Jennifer and Kevin McCoy, who minted the earliest known NFT as part of their 2014 work "Quantum." Like everything else involving blockchains, *The Inside World* primarily invokes the technology to overcomplicate itself and add monetization to elements that have no need of it. Described as a "crowdsourced gameplay mystery-thriller," its narrative, about a group of AI who manage a future Las Vegas, is set to play out ever platforms like Discord. One can purchase randomly generated NFT cards (there are supposedly 8,000 possible unique cards on the initial offering) which facilitate user participation in the story, though exactly how this works is difficult to ascertain. Since buying into this aspect requires the Ethereum equivalent of hundreds of US dollars, I cannot report on its specifics. Nothing about this proposition passes a basic sniff test, and it appears few are biting, since at the time of writing the Discord has just over a hundred members. Collaborative interactive fiction and randomly generated content have both been done, and buying mix-and-match artwork as a tie-in doesn't seem like it would add anything to the experience.

This is, of course, one of the most persistent problems with metaverse ventures: solutions in search of problems. The structure of the Spaceship itself is symptomatic of this as well. Rather than explore the potential of an infinite digital canvas, the different spaces try to replicate the real-life experiences they approximate in an overly literal fashion. The mingling space (rarely occupied by more than a few people at a time whenever I popped in) looks like a bar. The Gallery, where one can view the New Frontier projects, is just what the name suggests — a virtual art gallery. One goes up to a painting representing a work and clicks on a button to begin it. This conceit shows less imagination than *Super Mario 64*, a video game released in 1996, in which Mario could physically jump into paintings to travel to other worlds. What does this really offer besides adding extra steps to the simple act of navigating a virtual menu?

It is fortunate that within this limited interface, the featured artists pull off some impressive feats. Two works — Gilles Jobin's ***Cosmogony*** and Valencia James's *Suga'* — experiment with the possibilities of live performance within VR. In *Cosmogony,* three dancers run through a routine in Geneva, documented live with motion-capture technology, and their physicalities appear within the virtual space. I say "physicalities" instead of "bodies" because their forms continually shapeshift throughout the piece; one moment they are humanoid, the next they are animalistic. The environments in which they appear change as well. The continual disjunction of setting and identifiable protagonists makes the work visually busy but simultaneously also strips it down, heightening the effect of the choreography. It also ingeniously uses mirroring to multiply its central trio into a larger cast so that, for instance, each dancer appears as different iterations that are all different sizes in a single cityscape.



Suga' is focused even more intently on digitally uprooting a performance from a fixed point — not just in space but also in time. Tracing the history of the transatlantic slave trade and its connection to the sugar industry, the piece is set in a volumetric recreation of the ruins of the Annaberg Sugar Plantation on Saint John in the Virgin Islands. Rendered as millions of floating points of spatial data from the real site, the space is ghostly, as if it is invisible and its contours made visible only within a sandstorm — or a sugar storm. The technology used results in less "refined" digital imagery than in *Cosmogony*, but the stuttery, hologram-like image of James dancing feels appropriate in this context, as she projects herself as a spirit to disrupt the ugly history of the setting. Though the space also hosts sobering exhibitions on slavery, James incorporates personal family narratives to situate this shared online experience as a source of healing.

The most potent geographical dislocation comes with ***Gondwana***, which also experiments heavily with duration. A procedurally generated 24-hour experience, every 14 minutes, the simulated Daintree Rainforest leaps forward one year. With the details programmed based on the projected arc for the real Daintree forest should climate change continue unabated, the environment decays a little bit with each time hop. Whether one checks in several times over the course of a day or musters the stamina to actually hang around for the entire runtime, you will behold the destruction of this beautiful place in an immediate, visceral way. If the 2022 New Frontier lineup is about "biodigital" life, it is this piece that demonstrates some of the power VR immersion grants to heightening the relationship between life and technology.

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