Xtra Rice: Opportunities for Social VR as a Reflective Medium in Navigating the Filipino Identity

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Abstract

Social Virtual Reality (SVR) is a powerful medium for social interaction, enabling embodied experiences and fostering VR-native communities. As a result, SVR presents unique opportunities for Filipinos globally to reconnect with their cultural heritage and maintain their identity. In this paper, I reflect on SVR's potential in sharing Filipino culture through a literature review and scenarios. I identify two research opportunities: sharing culture through food and community. I argue that SVR affordances, such as embodiment, presence, and user-generated content, can create meaningful experiences for Filipinos to engage with their heritage. Furthermore, I highlight the role of Filipino HCI researchers in developing culturally relevant SVR experiences and emphasize the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration and community engagement. My work contributes to discussions on SVR's potential in fostering cultural identity, social connection, and well-being among Filipinos worldwide.

Keywords

Social VR, Virtual Reality, CSCW, CEUR-WS

1. Introduction

During the earlier months of the COVID-19 pandemic, the world shut down. This compelled many people to abruptly change their routines and be limited to the confines of their homes. As people were adapting to the new normal, SVR platforms like *VRChat* had emerged as an avenue where different people could socialize together in a shared 3D space. In these 3D spaces, users could interact with other people through a wide array of activities, such as collaboratively designing cakes [1], participating in professional meetings [2], and even just hanging out. The social experiences found within SVR focus on fostering social interaction and individual expression through personalized avatars and user-generated content [3, 4, 5]. Unlike contemporary social platforms like *Facebook* and communication tools like *Zoom*, SVR provides its users with an immersive social experience thanks to the higher fidelity of interaction unlocked by technologies like full-body tracking [6]. In *VRChat*, VR-native communities like *Helping Hands (est. 2018)* and the *VRChat Trans Academy (est. 2022)* maximized these affordances to support their community members. Helping Hands[1] regularly organized sessions inside VRChat where interested folks could learn how to "sign" through VR-adapted versions of

[1]https://vrchat-legends.fandom.com/wiki/Helping_Hands

different sign languages like American Sign Language. On the other hand, the VRChat Trans Academy[2] runs regular events and meetups to support the trans community in VRChat by providing them a safe space where they can go to. Prior work by [7] uncovered how the unique social interactions found within VRChat made the SVR experience more meaningful to those who use them. More recently, [4] shined a light on how avatars, a user's digital representation in SVR, could help a person explore their sense of 'self' through experimenting with avatars that have different features compared to their physical appearances. However, not every interaction in SVR is a pleasant experience. This was highlighted in the work of [8], who found that the increased embodiment and presence provided by SVR lead can be particularly problematic for those who encounter violations of personal space. Furthermore, [8] found that people had different definitions of harassment, which could pose as a challenge in governing these SVR platforms. My work explores the potential of SVR as a reflective medium for navigating the Filipino identity and how it can support Filipinos and the Filipino diaspora in reconnecting with their cultural heritage. By examining prior literature, I identified two key research opportunities: sharing culture through food and sharing culture through community. I argue that SVR's unique affordances, such as increased embodiment, presence, and user-generated content, can be leveraged to create meaningful experiences that enable Filipinos and the diaspora to engage with their cultural identity. Furthermore, I highlight the crucial role of Filipino HCI researchers in developing and promoting SVR applications tailored to the needs of the global Filipino community. This paper contributes to the ongoing discussions on the potential of SVR in fostering cultural identity, social connection, and well-being among Filipinos worldwide by providing insights into the research opportunities and the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration and community engagement in creating culturally relevant and accessible SVR experiences.

2. Research Opportunities

The complex interplay of community support systems, identity, embodiment, and personal space presents an opportunity for HCI researchers from the Philippines to explore how Filipinos and the Filipino diaspora could positively benefit from the affordances provided by SVR. In the following, I will be detailing two research opportunities in SVR based on prior literature that can support those who wish to connect with Filipino culture.

2.1. Sharing Culture through Food

The story and cultural context of a nation's people can be told through their cuisine. A country's national dish, its ingredients, methods of preparation, and occasions when these dishes are served can show a unique historical perspective on how a nation was built. For instance, in the Philippines, the unofficial national dish *Adobo* is generally prepared by marinating meat in soy sauce and vinegar. The word *Adobo* itself comes from Spanish, which highlights the country's colonial history and the use of soy sauce and vinegar highlights the influence of Chinese cooking. While *Adobo* has a general method of preparation and common ingredients,

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[2]https://vrchat-legends.fandom.com/wiki/Trans_Academy

an article by [9] mentions that there are different variations and recipes across the country. One could say that while each Filipino has their own way of creating *Adobo*, its essence remains the same thanks to its historical underpinnings. Indeed, cuisine is an integral part of a nation's culture and identity. In the work of [10], they posit that communicating through food leads to a deeper understanding of the history, cultural influences, and dynamics that led to the creation of that dish. In the case of *Adobo*, it tells the country's history with Spanish colonialization and its history of trade with East Asia. Considering the role food plays in telling a country's history, would new technologies like SVR be able to preserve this history and enable people to understand culture through virtual worlds that can be easily be accessed and experienced without physically going to another country?

SVR's ability to enable groups of people to be digitally co-located within the same virtual space has recently been showing its potential as a tool for bridging gaps in Internet communication. For instance, scholars like [1] have explored how SVR could be leveraged in supporting the co-design of a cake between a pastry chef and a customer. They revealed how their SVR co-design tool enabled participants to gain a shared understanding of both the cake design process and the final output. Building on the work of [1], I posit that there are opportunities and directions for HCI researchers to explore how a deeper understanding of culture can be achieve in an SVR context. Collaborative activities in SVR are the tip of the iceberg, and future research can extend the work of [1] to see what else SVR has in store as a method of communication.

2.2. Sharing Culture through Community

Community and personal relationships are important for us human beings. While global restrictions imposed during the on-set of COVID-19 have since been lifted by many authorities around the world, many people suffered loneliness, trauma, and anxiety during that time. The work of [11] reveals how the SVR platform RecRoom became an effective tool in reducing loneliness and social anxiety for adult players at the time. Furthermore, [11] found that SVR provides a higher sense of immersion and presence thanks to the tools that players can use to create their own experiences. The work of [12] tells a similar story: SVR innovates how people experience social support. For example, [12] noted how LGBTQ+ SVR users gradually built their self-confidence over time by leveraging SVR platforms as a sandbox for experiments that would not be possible in the physical world. The continued rise of SVR communities orientated around social support (like *Helping Hands* and the *VRChat Trans Academy*) illustrate the power of the SVR medium in providing support to their communities. As SVR continues to gain traction and moves into the mainstream, it would be interesting to see how SVR could be used to provide support and guidance to the Filipino diaspora, particularly those who wish to learn more about their culture, identity, and heritage but lack the means to do so. The prior work of [11, 12] provide a foundation for future researchers to generalize and explore how SVR as a technology could help support non-SVR users in exploring their identity.

In the following sections, I will share some examples of projects that leveraged VR as a means to share culture, language, and history.

3. Examples of Cultural Experiences in VR

VR technology allows for cultural experiences that can be accessed by anyone around the world in a moment's notice, so long as people have access to a VR headset. This can be seen in prior work from scholars like [13] and [14], who aimed to study the effectiveness of immersive VR experiences in sharing culture to others.

3.1. Japanese Language and Culture in VR

The work of [13]'s explored how one could teach Japanese language and culture through a VR game called *Crystallize*. The game focused on teaching users how and when to bow in Japanese social interaction and was offered in both VR and non-VR modes. Their results suggested that participants who used the VR mode felt a higher sense of involvement with Japanese culture compared to those who used the non-VR mode. [13] study shows the potential of VR as a tool that lets VR users feel a greater sense of appreciation and understanding of foreign cultures compared to non-VR experiences.

3.2. VR Tourism in Malaysia

[14]'s study explored how the cultural heritage and artifacts of Hang Tuah Village in Melaka, Malaysia could be preserved through an immersive VR experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. The VR experience enabled users to interact with cultural artifacts, learn about Hang Tuah, and learn the history surrounding the village without the need for physical presence and disturbing the heritage site. Study participants who experienced the VR app reported high acceptance through an adapted User Experience Questionnaire. The VR experience designed by [14] shows the capability of VR as an effective, low-cost, and respectful medium for learning about the history of a country from one's own home.

Based on prior work, VR provides an immersive experience that enables users who own VR headsets to experience and interact with different cultures without the need to travel. Further, VR experiences provide a degree of appreciation and understanding of history and cultures that traditional, non-VR experiences (like watching documentaries and videos) can't provide. This distinct characteristic of VR provides a solid foundation that SVR experiences can leverage in their design.

4. Strengths and Challenges of Cultural Experiences in SVR

SVR enables unique embodied experiences that aren't possible through traditional flat-screen mediums. One recent example of a unique SVR experience is how SVR users cultivated a grassroots electronic music scene where users can participate in community-organized raves inside a VR environment that comes close to the real-life experience of clubbing and raving [15]. However, it's important to note that VR technology currently serves a niche audience. With regards to technological innovation and societal impact, VR also presents some pros and cons that researchers should consider.

4.1. Strengths

One of the hallmarks of VR and SVR experiences is how the underlying technology can instantly "transport" people into a different reality. Whether that be through critically-acclaimed VR videogames like *Half-Life: Alyx*[3], or through massive SVR music festivals like *SlyFest*[4], VR technology allows for embodied, immersive experiences that are free from the limitations of the physical world. Looking back at the work of [14] in preserving Malaysian heritage sites, they were able to allow users to perform VR tourism in spite of the limitations presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. Taking the concept of VR tourism further, SVR tour groups in virtual representations of real-world cultural heritage sites can be an appealing option for both Filipinos and Filipinos in the diaspora to reconnect with Filipino culture in the absence of opportunities to physically travel and experience the country.

Another strength of the VR medium is how experiences can be programmed, scaled, and accessed by several people around the world at the same time without needing actual people to maintain them. In the case of [13]'s work on *Crystallize*, a VR game that taught Japanese language and culture, they were able to create a language learning game that not only taught their users Japanese sentences and phrases, but also non-verbal customs like bowing. Notably, their language learning tool didn't rely on active intervention from a human and instead relied on carefully designed interactions, in-game dialogue, and pre-choreographed, non-playable characters. Additionally, SVR communities such as *Helping Hands* extend the concept of gamified language learning experiences in VR by offering peer sessions and workshops to those who want a more traditional sign language learning experience with instructors that are there to help those who have any questions. In the physical world, those who are interested to learn the Filipino language have to choose between watching video lessons, using traditional language learning apps, or signing up for an online/in-person language course with an instructor. SVR allows for these traditional methods, while extending at the same time through self-serve experiences (such as the *Crystallize* language game) and community-focused, peer experiences (such as *Helping Hands*). For people who want to learn about the Filipino language and its customs, the scalability, accessibility, and flexibility provided by SVR can be a game-changing and arguably better resource for those who have little to no connections to the mainland.

VR technology and the SVR niche presents an attractive environment where cultural experiences can be shared, experienced, and appreciated on a deeper level. VR tourism and SVR tour groups can enable people to experience Filipino culture and history without having to spend money on plane tickets and accommodations. Furthermore, the nature of SVR as a whole means that aspects of Filipino culture and identity, such as language, can be shared and accessed by many at scale and at lower cost, without the limitations of the physical world. In spite of the positives previously mentioned, SVR is not a silver bullet, and there are still certain limitations in VR technology and SVR platforms that make representing aspects of Filipino culture a challenge.

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[3]https://store.steampowered.com/app/546560/HalfLife_Alyx/
[4]https://https://www.slyfest.com/

4.2. Challenges

VR enables users to interact with virtual worlds through a variety of modalities, such as gaze [16], controllers [17], and gestures and hand-tracking [18, 19]. In recent years, researchers have been studying how the integration of human senses like smell and touch can affect the VR experience. [20]'s work conceptually explored how low-cost, non-digital materials can potentially be used to further integrate the 5 senses of smell, sound, taste, touch, and sight in VR experiences. Related to this, [21, 22] have previously explored how haptic feedback vests affect how a user engages with a virtual world. The work of [21] found that certain users self-reported a higher level of presence and usability when using haptic vests in a VR environment. Based on previous work, it is clear that integrating more human senses into VR experiences improve the engagement of VR users. With the current state of VR technology however, integrating human senses in VR like smell and physical touch remain to be a challenge because of the complexity, accessibility, and cost of current solutions [23]. This can be seen in the commercial market with the availability of consumer-focused haptic tools like the TactSuit X16 ($329 USD)[5] and TactGlove DK2 ($249 USD) [6] from bHaptics costing almost as much as a Meta Quest 3 VR headset ($499.99 USD) [7]. This presents both a technological and financial barrier to entry for those who want to create and experience "authentic" cultural experiences in SVR, particularly in experiences that feature physical sensations and culinary heritage.

The lack of accessible and affordable methods that integrate the senses in VR can pose as a challenge for those who wish to share the traditional Filipino folk dance *Tinikling*[24], which relies on a consistent beat produced by tapping and sliding bamboo poles on the ground. Another example where the lack of senses can pose a challenge is for sharing Filipino cuisine, which features a mixture of sweet, salty, tangy, and sour flavor profiles [25]. Filipino dishes like *Kare-Kare*[26] (which features a nutty flavor) and *Bicol Express*[27] (which features a creamy and spicy flavor) can be challenging to represent in VR without having tasted them in real life. The physical sensations of folk dances like *Tinikling* and the flavor profiles of Filipino cuisine are parts of what shapes Filipino culture and identity. Unfortunately, cultural VR experiences are not able to fully communicate these with the technology that we have today. This can be particularly challenging for those who wish to cultivate a stronger connection between the Philippines and those in the diaspora, as the lack of these senses (in both VR and non-VR contexts) can lead to cultural aspects being lost in translation and can potentially become a point of friction between the mainland and the diaspora.

With current VR technology, we can already see how the addition of senses in the design of VR environments can potentially provide VR users with more impactful experiences, albeit not currently widely accessible to general consumers. However, scholars like [20] argue that using non-digital elements from the real world (grass, sand, wind, etc.) could be a way to creatively bring in human senses into VR experiences at low cost. Researchers and practitioners who wish to reach a wide audience can look further into the tradeoffs and implications of digital and non-digital approaches in designing cultural VR experiences. As technology evolves and costs go down, it is clear that senses like smell and touch will open new design directions and

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[5]https://www.bhaptics.com/shop/tactsuit-x16/
[6]https://www.bhaptics.com/shop/tactglove/
[7]https://www.meta.com/at/en/quest/quest-3/

research opportunities once these are able to be offered to consumers with lower cost and better accessibility.

5. Discussion

The wonderful world of SVR is a niche that not many know about. And yet, even at its relatively early stages, it's starting to emerge as a powerful tool that enables embodied social experiences over the Internet. VR-native communities and support systems have formed and created safe spaces for individuals who are not comfortable with their identity and self-presentation [12]. SVR opens up new avenues for Filipinos and other ethnic groups in the diaspora to reconnect with and maintain their cultural identity. For instance, the creation of virtual representations of Filipino cuisine (mentioned in 2.1) could not only showcase the rich culinary traditions of the Philippines but also highlight the history and struggles of the Filipino people. Moreover, SVR can provide a virtual space and social support system for those who are disconnected from their culture but wish to reconnect (mentioned in 2.2). Further, SVR can evolve the ways that language learning and tourism can be done, not only providing static virtual environments but also spaces for group interaction and collaboration (mentioned in 3). SVR serves as a platform for individuals to engage with their own identity and others who may share a similar background. These possibilities can be particularly valuable to those who are limited by geographical distance or lack access to their cultural heritage. As SVR technology continues to develop, there is an opportunity to discover and define the ways the SVR can support people's social lives. With an estimated number of 1.96M Filipino workers abroad [28] and as the 3rd largest Asian group in America [29], there is a unique opportunity for Filipino HCI researchers to explore and develop SVR experiences that can help both native Filipinos and the Filipino diaspora to gain a deeper connection with the culture. In addition to exploring the SVR space, Filipino HCI researchers can also play a crucial role in promoting the adoption and accessibility of these technologies among the Filipino diaspora. By engaging with community organizations, cultural centers, and other stakeholders, researchers can raise awareness about the potential benefits of SVR and provide training and support to help individuals navigate and utilize these applications effectively. As the field of SVR continues to evolve, it presents a significant opportunity for Filipino HCI researchers to make a meaningful impact on the lives of Filipinos in the diaspora. By leveraging their cultural expertise, collaborating with other disciplines, and engaging with the community, researchers can contribute to the development of SVR applications that foster cultural identity, social connection, and well-being among Filipinos worldwide.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I explore the potential of SVR as a reflective medium for navigating the Filipino identity. Through an examination of prior literature, I identified two key research opportunities: sharing culture through food and sharing culture through community. I posit that SVR's unique affordances, such as increased embodiment, presence, and user-generated content, can be harnessed to create meaningful experiences that enable Filipinos and the Filipino diaspora to reconnect with their cultural heritage. Moreover, I underscore the vital role that Filipino

HCI researchers can play in developing and promoting SVR experiences tailored to the needs of the global Filipino community. As SVR continues to evolve, I stress the significance of interdisciplinary collaboration and community engagement in creating culturally relevant and accessible SVR experiences. Ultimately, I contend that exploring these research opportunities will contribute to the development of SVR applications that nurture cultural identity, social connection, and well-being among Filipinos, both in the Philippines and abroad.

Acknowledgments

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