The Eternal Ephemeral by Friend Generator

David Han

York University

Toronto, Canada

david.han88@gmail.com

Figure 1: Opening room in *The Eternal Ephemeral* © David Han

Abstract

The Eternal Ephemeral is a WebXR experience created for PC VR head-mounted displays. Drawing from the conference theme of the Everywhen, it employs variance and repetition across multiple spatial, visual, kinesthetic, and auditory motifs to explore the concept of the collapse of the physical and virtual and the coalescing of multiple temporalities.

Keywords

Virtual Reality, WebXR, Immersive Media, Media Arts, Spatial Media, Immersive Design

Introduction

"Everything proceeds as if space had been trapped by time, as if there were no history other than the last forty-eight hours of news, as if each individual history were drawing its motives, its words and images, from the inexhaustible stock of an unending history in the present."

Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity.* [1]

The Eternal Ephemeral is a journey through the Everywhen, the notion that past, present and future are co-habiting any given location. Within this WebXR experience, the virtual and the real collide, opening up a gateway to a space in-between that is mundane, yet unfamiliar. A place where the everyday and routine animate the obscure and the alien, enabling the potential of the virtual to seep into the real. This symbiosis of the real and the virtual is mutually beneficial, perhaps even necessary, facilitating the expansion of both realms and revealing each as unique parts of a continuous whole.

Project Description

The Eternal Ephemeral is a WebXR experience created for PC VR head-mounted displays. It employs a photorealistic aesthetic to create a convincing and familiar real-world environment. However, as participants travel through the environment, this photorealistic aesthetic is increasingly disrupted by repeating thematic elements such as sounds, virtual objects, characters, etc. Much like the repetition of motifs and themes in a piece of music, the repetition of these thematic elements invites participants to reconsider the

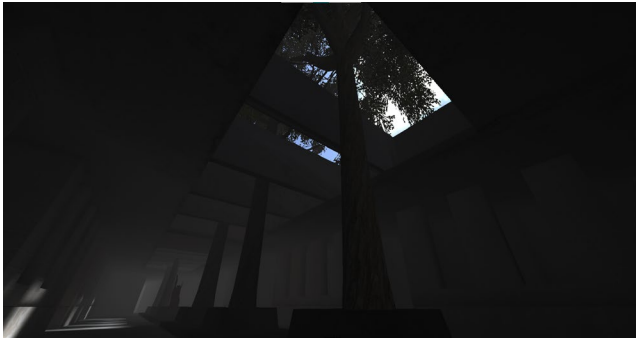entirety of the experience in relation to perceived similarities and differences.

Figure 2: Looking up at trees and the sky in *The Eternal Ephemeral* © David Han

In spatializing these thematic elements in a VR environment, this work aims to create a unique experience where the integration of the real and virtual raise questions about the ontological and relational status of both. Given tools designed to simulate the physical properties of the real world, what is the nature of the relationship between the virtual and the real? How do virtual experiences differ from those had in the real world? Does it matter? Can the latent potential of the virtual, untethered by physical limitations, unlock new ways of imagining or inhabiting the real world? If so, how?

Figure 3: Two small figures intimately embrace each other in *The Eternal Ephemeral* © David Han

The experience begins in a large, windowless room. The exposed concrete walls and floors, minimal decorative elements, and natural light cascading in through an overhead opening are characteristic of Brutalist architecture, a mid-20th century architectural style often used in institutional settings such as public libraries and universities. The sounds of a large machine can be heard in the distance, reverberating throughout the space. A bright blue, partly cloudy sky can be glimpsed through an opening above and passages to adjoining rooms can be seen at either end. As the participant moves through a passage to an adjoining room, they discover another room, very similar to the first. Each successive room introduces variations, sometimes small and

sometimes significant. As a result, a participant's trajectory through these rooms generates a spatial "score", where certain thematic elements come and go, repeat and evolve over time, generating new experiences and re-contextualizing previous ones. Ultimately, the participant ends up back where they started. However, although the room is the same, the participant is not.

In creating an environment where the virtual leaks into the real, seeping into the fabric of the familiar and commonplace, *The Eternal Ephemeral* suggests that the potential in the virtual lies in how it can transform the mundane into the alien, asking us to reconsider what has always been with us and that which we take for granted.

Project Context

This work emerged as a result of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the patterns of everyday life. During the height of the pandemic, I was fortunate enough to be confined to a desk and communicate with the world through cameras and screens, keyboards and mice. As such, I became acutely aware of how my physical environment, with its specific contours and rhythms, was reduced and constrained, while I increasingly took up residency within virtual environments. And although I was somewhat surprised with the apparent ease with which I could shift from physical to virtual, I became increasingly fixated on the relationship between these two realms.
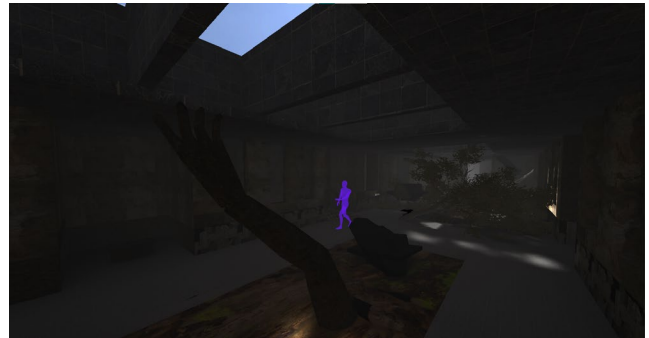

Figure 4: One of the later rooms in the experience with mismatched textures in *The Eternal Ephemeral* © David Han

As an immersive media artist, it was clear to me that the virtual is the spawn of the physical. The 3D authoring tools I used to create immersive virtual environments mimic or even re-create the physics of the physical world. The complex interplay of light and shadow as it reflects off a small puddle or the movement of a mote of dust as it flutters through a beam of light are just two examples of physical phenomena that have found their virtual equivalent through the application of real-world physics to virtual objects. At the same time, the digital realm is intricately and actively interwoven with the physical world. Social movements originating in virtual spaces have increasingly exerted a

profound and significant influence on global life while the mediation of life through technology has dramatically altered human perception, thought, and culture.

This was the context in which *The Eternal Ephemeral* was created. During its inception, I kept coming back to Bachelard's notion of "the dialectics of inside and outside," where the symmetry of inside and outside, or the physical and virtual, is not as harmonious as initially thought, and the dialectics themselves "multiply with countless diversified nuances." [2]

The Collapse of the Physical and the Virtual

At the heart of *The Eternal Ephemeral*, we find ourselves at the confluence of the physical and virtual realms. This intersection is not a mere collision of disparate elements but a harmonious symphony that orchestrates the rhythm of our existence. As we navigate through this WebXR experience, we are reminded that our understanding and experience of place are shaped by a multitude of forces—forces that are at once human, non-human, and technological.

As with the Everywhen, *The Eternal Ephemeral* challenges us to consider the layered ecologies that envelop us. It prompts us to reflect on how these ecologies interact, how they shape sustainable and interconnected places, and how they influence our perception of the world.

Figure 5: Animated figures explore the spaces of *The Eternal Ephemeral* © David Han

The Eternal Ephemeral delves into the concept of collapsed temporality by weaving a complex tapestry of spatial, kinaesthetic, visual, and auditory motifs that recur throughout the journey. These motifs serve as anchors in the ever-shifting landscape of time, creating a sense of continuity and resonance that transcends the linear progression of moments. Spatial motifs manifest in the form of recurring architectural elements and topographies that echo the contours of the natural world. These motifs are not static; they evolve and morph, reflecting a dynamic nature. As participants move through the experience, they encounter familiar elements— a lazy cloud, a towering tree, an expanse of smooth concrete—that appear and reappear, each time imbued with new meaning and significance.

Kinesthetic motifs are embedded in the animated elements of the experience. Through gestures and movements, participants engage with the environment, possibly triggering events that echo across different temporal planes. A dance that begins in the ancient past finds its echo in the distant future; a ritual that was once performed by ancestors is reenacted in the digital present, creating a physical connection to the continuum of time.

Visual motifs are offered to evoke both the logic of the dream and the banal and everyday. Patterns and images that hold significance are repeated, each iteration revealing deeper layers of meaning. These visual cues act as portals, offering glimpses both forward and backward in time.

Figure 6: Rain falling inside one of the rooms of *The Eternal Ephemeral* © David Han

Auditory motifs play a crucial role in the experience, with sounds that weave through the fabric of the experience. The repetition of certain soundscapes intend to guide participants through the layers of time and space that are both eternal and immediate.

Together, these motifs create a rich, multisensory experience that challenges participants to perceive time not as a sequence of events but as a confluence of moments that exist simultaneously. The repetition of these motifs reinforces the notion that the past, present, and future are not separate entities but are interwoven within the fabric of the experience, accessible at every point in space.

Brutalism and the Sense of Non-Place

In *The Eternal Ephemeral*, the use of Brutalist architecture is a deliberate choice that serves to evoke a sense of non-place—an environment that is at once familiar and alienating, haunting yet comforting. Brutalism, with its raw concrete forms and imposing structures, offers a stark backdrop that contrasts with the fluidity of the other elements. It is a style that commands attention, demanding contemplation and engagement from the observer.

The experience utilizes the Brutalist aesthetic to create an environment that feel institutional yet anonymous, a place that could exist anywhere and nowhere simultaneously.

These spaces are devoid of the traditional markers of identity and history, which allows participants to project their own narratives onto the blank canvas of the architecture. The repetitive geometric shapes, the monolithic slabs, and the rigid lines of Brutalist interiors become a metaphor for the rigidity of time as perceived by the Western mind—linear, unyielding, and structured.

Yet, within this framework of concrete and steel, *The Eternal Ephemeral* introduces subtle disruptions—minor alterations to small details that might go unnoticed at first glance. A subtle change to a random element, a variation in texture on a wall, a shift in the pattern of shadows as light filters through the space—all these elements serve to disrupt the monotony and hint at a deeper complexity.

Figure 7: Several large figures peer down at the participant inside one of the rooms of *The Eternal Ephemeral* © David Han

Difference and Repetition

The repetition of motifs in *The Eternal Ephemeral* places a significant emphasis on these minor differences, drawing the participant's attention to the nuances of change and the importance of detail. As one moves through the Brutalist landscape, these small differences accumulate, creating a cumulative effect that challenges the participant's perception of uniformity and stasis.

This attention to detail mirrors the way the Everywhen operates—where minor variations in the landscape hold profound significance, where a small change can signify a shift in time or a new chapter in the story. The experience teaches us to look closer, to appreciate the subtleties that might otherwise be overlooked, and to recognize the beauty in the imperfections.

Through this interplay of repetition and variation, *The Eternal Ephemeral* invites participants to explore the concept of collapsed temporality not just intellectually but viscerally. It is an exploration that is both spatial and temporal, where the architecture itself becomes a narrative device that tells a story of time, memory, and the ever-present now.

References

[1] Marc Augé, *Non-places: introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity* (London: Verso, 2008), 104-5.
[2] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon, 1994), 216.

Bibliography

Augé, Marc. *Non-places: introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity.* London, UK: Verso, 2008.

Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space.* Boston MA: Beacon, 1994.

Biagi, Francesco. *Henri Lefebvre's critical theory of space.* Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

de Certeau, Michel. *The practice of everyday life.* Berkely, CA: University of California Press, 2002.

Ihde, Don. *Bodies in Technology.* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.

Krueger, Myron W. *Artificial Reality.* Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1983.

Nora, Pierre, Kritzman, L. D. (Ed.). *Realms of Memory: Rethinking French Past.* Translated by Arthur Goldhammer. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1996-1998.

Perec, Georges. *An attempt at exhausting a place in Paris.* Cambridge, MA: Wakefield Press, 2010.

Tavinor, Grant. *The Aesthetics of Virtual Reality.* New York, NY: Routledge, 2022.