

Utilizing Virtual Reality and Video Installation to Explore Emotional Responses to Death and Dying

Virtual Reality (VR) has been used in recent research on empathy creation for caregivers to experience what it is like during the final stages of their loved one's lives. California-based Embodied Labs, created a VR experience to help nurses and caregivers, empathize with patients at the end of their lives. The ASH Art of Death Digital Storytelling Research Team utilizes these tools to create an experience for viewers to move through the final stages of death and dying.

The *In-Between* is an interactive multimedia experience composed of two parts: A projected and VR video. The three scenes are a hospital bed, a burial, and waking to an afterlife, meant to represent the different stages of death. The team set out to create open-ended imagery that would leave room for interpretation from the viewer. Filmed from the perspective of the viewer, participants felt like they were in that environment and experiencing this process themselves.

Participants (N=36) viewed the projection as a group with the video filling the room, while the virtual reality video was experienced individually. The majority of participants (80.56%) felt the VR experience led them to reflect on mortality more than the projected video. The majority of participants (63.89%) also felt a greater than average sense of peace, whereas a minority (16.67%) of participants felt a greater than average sense of anxiety.

The data is a preliminary indication of what to study further: The experiential aspect of the study limited participants in the time allowed for data collection, so data is not a representative sample. Results indicate how the level of immersion in a death experience affects the thoughts and feelings of participants. Giving viewers the opportunity to conceptualize their own death could create an accepting mentality around dying and encourage open conversation.