

# Step into my (virtual) world: An exploration of virtual reality drawing applications for arts therapy

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## Abstract

This article explores the feasibility and potential of virtual reality (VR) in the context of arts therapy. Although technology advances at an ever-increasing rate, arts therapists have been slow and hesitant in taking up computers and software. Here the authors provide a brief overview of research to date into reasons for this apparent lack of adoption, and list the requirements of technology used in the context of therapy, followed by the introduction of VR applications for arts therapy. Employing art-based and practice-led research, they document their findings, which emerged in three phases: free exploration of the VR drawing application (open studio approach, transitional objects); use of the narrative therapy framework; and introduction to ANZATA symposium attendees in Christchurch in 2016. Based on these findings, the article highlights the benefits and limitations of using VR drawing applications in arts therapy.

## Keywords

Virtual reality, three-dimensional, drawing, digital technology, multi-modal, arts-based practice-led research.

## Introduction

In 1999, Shaun McNiff (as cited in Malchiodi, 2000) stated:

Civilization does advance through new technologies and art therapy needs to move with it. ...advances in computer multimedia are perfectly suited for our particular ways of integrating artistic creation and perception with other forms of communication such as voice, text, touch, and movement. Art therapy, perhaps more than any other therapeutic modality, is perfectly suited to these new technologies. We simply need the imagination and creative resources to seize the opportunity. (p.98)<sup>1</sup>

Even though the philosophical groundwork had been laid, very little happened in the area of arts therapy and technology for a number of years. More recently, Thong (2007) and Evans (2012) revisited the need for technological tools, and

argued that, specifically, clients who have grown up in a technological world – the ‘digital natives’ (Prensky, 2001) – as well as clients who are reluctant to use more traditional methods, might benefit from advances into the technological realm.

Therapists of any profession rely on their clients’ ability to explain their world, primarily using words. Arts therapists have opened the door to visual art, movement and other media, adding creative ‘languages’ to traditional talk therapy. In arts therapy, “art materials and media” (Choe, 2014, p.145) facilitate a pathway through which the client can elicit meaning, due to the fact that “they are intermediaries between private ideas, thoughts, feelings, and concepts, and their external manifestations in tangible, sensual form” (Moon, 2010, p.xv). Although this encourages non-verbal communication of feelings, thoughts and world views, the therapist still sits outside the client’s world: together, client and therapist might explore images, make sense of a dance,

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