

# VIRTUAL REALITY: THE WORLD FROM A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

**QA** with Gilles Freissinier  
Arte Development Director

Interview by Urszula Gleisner

**In December 2015, in line with its innovation strategy, Arte invested in the immersive field of virtual reality with the launch of the "ARTE 360 VR" app. After 10 years of Arte's banking on digital development, Development Director Gilles Freissinier explains the channel's approach to the new technologies and its collaboration idea with African producers.**

**DISBOOK:** Arte launched the Arte 360 VR app a year and a half ago. Why did you decide to invest in 360 and virtual reality?

**Gilles Freissinier:** Moving on to virtual reality was a logical next step for Arte. It is as much a strategy as it is keeping up with audiovisual script-writing.

Immersion has been a background trend since cinema began as far as script-writing is concerned. First comes the picture, then the sound, then Dolby, then 3D etc. Always with the idea of achieving more emotions, more realism, more interactions with the story. Virtual reality is simply a new stage in this development.

The second reason for Arte's involvement is that we have been producing digital audiovisual programmes for 10 years. Our digital strategy reflects our global media rationale: Arte is a Franco-German channel that has, thanks to digital, reached the status of global European medium for culture and innovation with a Europe-wide presence. Digital allows Arte to fulfil its European purpose.

The third element is our mission to make culture accessible, to foster creativity, to innovate, to discover new French and European talents. This also involves digital creation.

Arte pioneered interactive documentaries. We produced fictions and video games to show that the public can also be drawn in through story-telling and cultural material on a video game.

Naturally this technology converges with virtual reality because audiovisual narration blends with the game's active narration: the viewer is immersed into first person's narration. We reflected on this process

and, about 4 years ago, were guided rather naturally to move interactive documentaries towards virtual reality technology. This is how we launched the Arte 360 VR app in December 2015.

Bringing the Arte brand to life in the world of virtual reality and combining our various ongoing experiences into a single application was a logical step. The idea was indeed to combine our offers to raise our profile as producer and broadcaster of innovative material.

**D: What type of content is available on the Arte 360 app today?**

**G. F.:** Today it is mainly videos. Broadcasting interactive contents requires specific apps, like the interactive documentary "Notes on Blindness" or the VR video game "Sens VR".

We offer documentaries, fiction, cinema making-ofs, certain reported stories and some live music, particularly for testing binaural sound (editor's note: 3D for the ears) and for immersion with the public. Overall the app offers more or less the same audiovisual genres as television and digital, with the exception perhaps of news broadcasts or magazines.

**D: What contents are you looking for?**

**G. F.:** We are always looking for contents that highlights an author's perspective, whether the aim is to tell a fiction story or to make sense of the world around us through documentaries. Fiction or documentary, we're interested in a different way of discovering the world through this particular perspective.

**D: Can you tell us something about the audience that uses this app?**

**G. F.:** It is a very international audience. The app recorded over 500,000 downloads and a sizeable proportion of people using it in English. We are therefore in a market that, albeit still small today, is however global and clearly transcends the Franco-German and European framework. The app extends to the United States and Asia.

But it is tricky to define the demographic profile of those users. They are obviously very technophile individuals who have an interest in all new narration forms, but we don't have a typical profile.

**D: How do you collaborate with producers of 360 and VR content? Do you initiate co-productions?**

**G. F.:** Arte is mostly a co-producer and very rarely engages in purchasing or pre-purchasing policies. This way of working allows us to get to know these new technologies as the producer does, rather than being restricted to purchasing ready-to-broadcast programmes.

So we follow a classic process: the producer submits a project, we select it based on our editorial policy, the project's appeal, its narrative perspective, the author, their creativity, and the project's fit with VR in terms of both form and content. We have to make sure that VR is justified and appropriate, that it isn't a gimmick, as this format is very "trendy" today. We have a large number of those proposals but not all are suited to virtual reality. Sometimes the "classic" digital format is more appropriate.

**D: How much do you contribute to the budget?**

**G. F.:** Often around 30 to 40% of the funding. The CNC (Centre National de la Cinématographie) helps a lot in France, and there are also various regional funds. Then the producer's contribution is the final piece.

**D: Are you open to co-producing with African producers?**

We took part in Digital Lab Africa last year where we were able to discover VR projects and interactive projects. We shadowed a production team reflecting on its project.

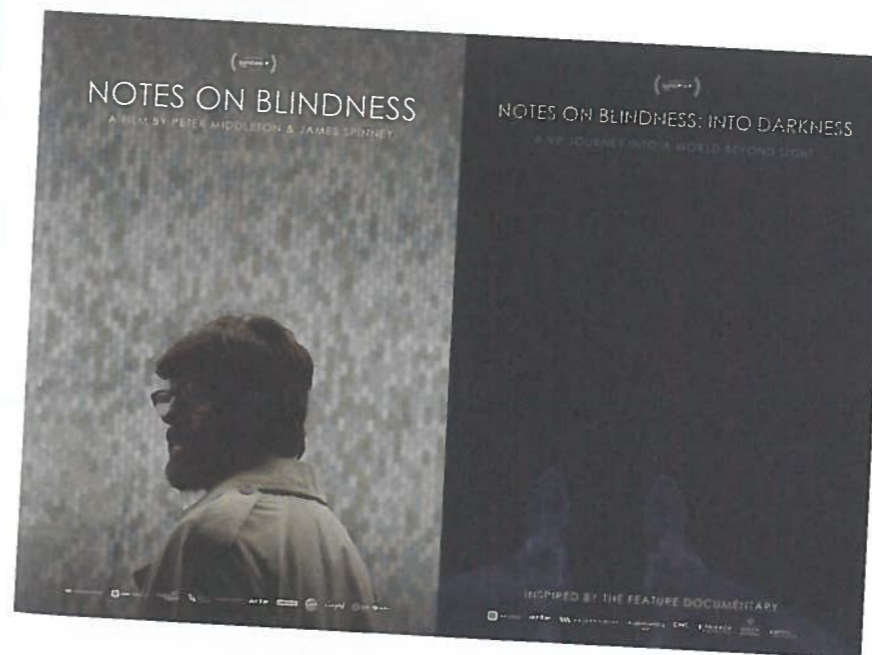
We are obviously open to projects emanating from outside Europe and are excited to shape their work with French producers and thus to integrate them into the French way of producing.

**D: What do you think of Digital Lab Africa?**

**G. F.:** The projects submitted were very varied, which allowed us to discover other producers, other networks and projects coming from new perspectives. We had to adapt our framework of interpretation which was interesting, refreshing and challenging.

We now have to reflect on how we can take forward the winning projects, as a project is always a gamble.

For example the project "Reborn - The Tryptic", from South Africans John DeVries and Greg Kriek, which won the Transmedia category for which I was a jury member and team mentor, does not fit in with Arte's editorial policy but is of interest to other broadcasters. Our work as mentor was to clarify and refine the project, and then to help the production team shape it further. We try to bring the benefit of our experience to bear on interactive fiction, virtual reality and other formats.



"Notes on Blindness" (2016), directed by Peter Middleton & James Spinney, is a documentary film and VR project that relates John Hull's progressive blindness, an Australian writer and theologian who had documented on audio tapes the upheavals brought about by sight loss and the new, resulting perceptions.

ARTE co-funded the feature documentary and the virtual reality application to accompany the film. The latter was developed by Agat Films and Toulouse-based start-up Audiogaming (winner of the Pass French tech). Audiogaming specialises in the development of real-time sound synthesis technologies and has worked on Quentin Tarantino's movie "Django Unchained" and the video game "Assassin's Creed".

D: What advice can you give African producers who wish to collaborate with ARTE on VR?

G. F.: I think that the first thing is to look at all that we do. There are lots of things already - at least 30 projects available on the app. That way producers can get an overall idea of what we are seeking and showcasing.

They also need to understand who are those French producers with whom we work on a regular basis (for instance those within the UNI-VR think tank who have a lot of productions). This will give them an idea of the kind of narration and the level of quality we are looking for.

African producers should not forget that there is also Switzerland, Germany, England and the United States.

D: What is VR's future?

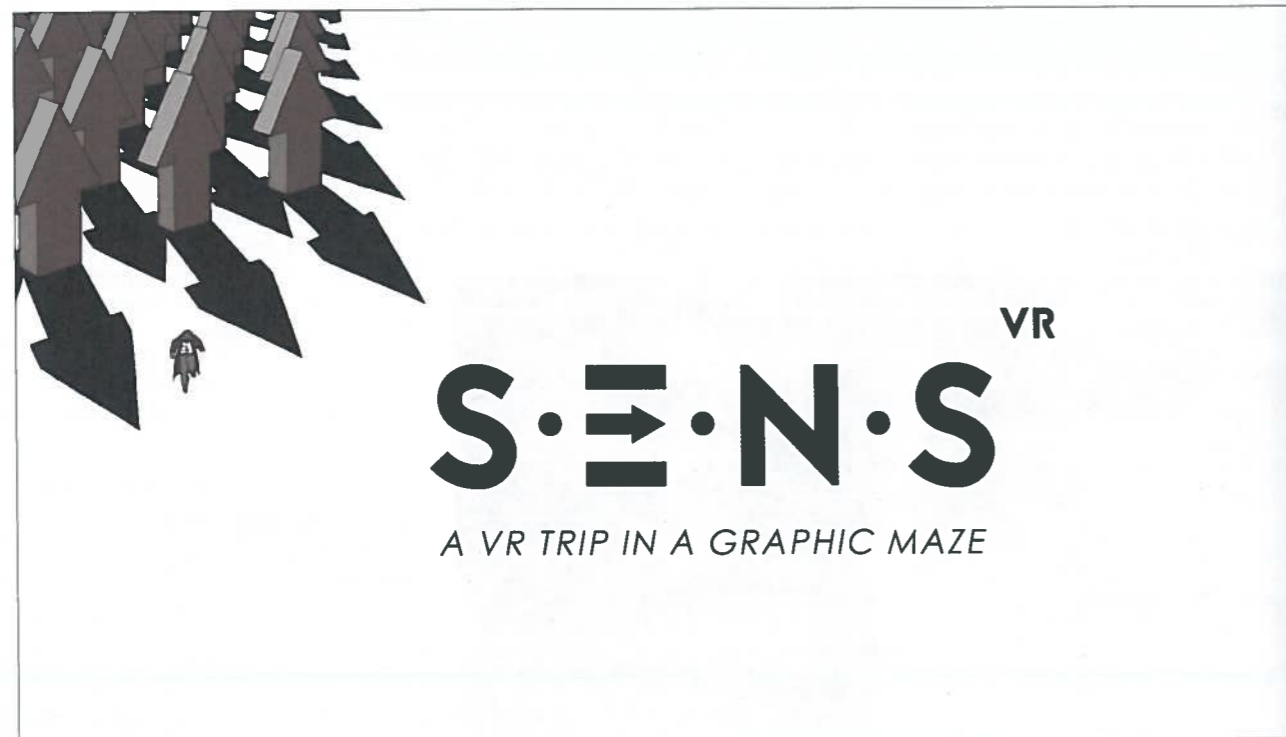
G. F.: That is a very good question and we would all like to know!

There are several versions. The pessimistic version sees it as a bubble that is not going to last; the optimistic and visionary version claims that everyone will be wearing a headset in 5 years' time and that this is the future; and the intermediary version says this is one of the means - among others - of telling stories.

Regarding whether there will be equipment within the home or whether this will take place in physical locations, it is hard to say. That will depend on the ease with which headsets can be used as they are still fairly complex. It takes a bit of a geek to master them. Everything is likely to get simplified, but to what extent?

VR's future will depend mainly on the proposed experience and programmes which remain the deciding factors for wearing a headset. It is up to the producers and broadcasters to offer interesting contents for this type of technology, so that they are not mere gadgets, or offers that have an amazing effect the first time round but lack real depth.

The programmes should offer experiences appropriate to the technology.



"S.E.N.S.VR" (nominated at several festivals and winner of the "Best Emotional VR Game" at the Emotional Games Awards 2016 held in Laval, Canada), co-produced by Arte France and the Red Corner studios, is the transposition of a graphic novel by Marc-Antoine Mathieu. The aim: to find our way through a constantly-evolving maze in which the user loses use landmarks. The game is available for Samsung and Oculus Rift VR headsets.

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