How do we harvest wisdom to guide us through uncertain times into an unknown future? Leonardo/ISAST aspires to do this through Leonardo and our other publications, curated programs, signature partnerships such as with Arizona State University (ASU), and our growing community of outside-the-box creatives from around the world.

In a recent conversation, visual storyteller and software pioneer Gary Yost shared how using VR and stereoscopic 3D film can create immersive experiences of shared wisdom. In exploring his Wisdom VR project, we discussed far-ranging issues: how proximity and scale create larger-than-life encounters, the distance required to see emerging patterns, cultivating empathy through relational rather than transactional immersive experience, the value of dwelling in fog, and the sense of urgency driving creativity for transformation today.

Pushing the boundaries of up-close-and-personal, Wisdom VR features intimate profiles of diverse elders and teachers. Paraphrasing Robert Kappa, Yost says, “If your photographs aren’t powerful enough, you’re not close enough.” The Wisdom VR film series uniquely overcomes technical issues of getting close enough by using the only stereoscopic, 360° camera on the planet. This technology creates intense imagery and radical access, deliberately allowing viewers to feel extremely close to the subjects. Charting the emotional impact when subjects are 36 inches away, 37, 38, 39, through to 45-in distance, the filmmakers’ research tracked a non-linear closeness curve. For subjects to appear in their own personal space, they need to be 43 in away from viewers, but for viewers to virtually inhabit the subject's space, subjects need to appear 36–37 inches away. This proximity field creates a feeling of connection that can’t be managed with other cameras. The immersive experience can be disorienting, uncomfortable, deeply personal and moving. Students in ASU’s Humanizing Digital Culture Lab referenced how liberating and weird it is to virtually hover within three feet of someone who is sharing their life story, while floating around their environment, checking out hidden details of private living and workspaces. This virtual presence heightens viewer awareness above a merely transactional experience of information exchange, into a more authentic, interrelational encounter, cultivating empathy and receptivity for diverse insights and identities.

Simultaneously, stepping back allows peripheral vision in space and distance over time; both are required for context and scope. Kinetic artist Reuben Margolin shares his views on perspective during his interview in the VR series: “If you step back far enough, everything emerges as pattern.” I’m reminded of those “magic eye” art images with embedded 3D elements that only become visible when you move back and soft-focus, or entirely defocus, your eyes in order to see more clearly what’s right in front of you. Similarly, Yost speaks of the value of hanging out with the fog, walking through the Bay Area’s invisibility cloak of mist, a meditative atmosphere of dense grey that miraculously gives way to clarity. This is how to see the world and move through it in new light. This is how to infuse digital tools with consciousness, conscientiousness and reverence.

Using VR technology to inspire pathways and illuminate patterns is urgent given the precious window remaining to glean wisdom from elders and indigenous communities. The sense of urgency driving creativity for transformation reflects recognition of the whiplash speed of systems-level change underway, accompanied by unparalleled existential and planetary threats to humankind. This urgency underscores an imperative to do creative work that matters. Perhaps imperative is the word of our time; this is an imperative moment to unlock, cultivate and excavate creative wisdom to guide us into the future.

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