

We are a generation obsessed with the obscene. In the last few years, the true-crime trend has gone from niche fad to international sensation. Amid the crowded world of podcasts, documentaries, books, and self-proclaimed sleuths, an app launched in November of 2020 will change the true-crime scene as we know it.

The app is CrimeDoor, an immersive Augmented Reality (AR) app that brings you face to face with some of the most heinous and disturbing murders in history. Users can walk into the very rooms where the bodies of victims lay as first responders and investigators would have found them. The cases available for uninterrupted exploration, for free or for purchase, include six-year-old JonBenét Ramsey, Nicole Brown, and Kathleen Peterson, among many others.

In an interview with Superb Crew, founder and CEO of CrimeDoor, Neil Mandt, talks of the potential for the app to offer inside details to Internet sleuths, enabling them to solve cold-cases through the software. Although there are cases on record that have been closed by amateur detectives, this occurrence is quite rare. Critics of the app view this suggested use as a scapegoat to allow for profiting off the exploitation of murder victims. Mandt subtly makes his hope for the newly launched app's success clear in his segway, "We currently have 5-Stars on the App Store and have received some very positive customer reviews. People tell us they appreciate that our sole purpose is to bring attention to the victims and present accurate information about the crime. They see the importance we place on authenticity and our careful attention to detail."

As I explored the virtual basement where six-year-old JonBenét Ramsey's lifeless body lay wrapped in a sheet, I thought of Mandt's claim to be bringing attention to the victims and his dedication to accuracy and detail. I also thought of the re-traumatization of the victim's families, the violation of inviting the general public to poke around the dead bodies of their loved ones, and the morality of charging users to explore their tragedies. How far is too far in the frenzied sensation of true-crime? Is the possibility of internet sleuths solving cold-cases worth the exploitation and debasement of murder victims? Is profiting off of the morbid curiosities of today's true-crime fans worth this invasion of privacy? Is this amateur detective work or simply voyeurism?

If the app is solely used for investigatory purposes as Mandt alleges, perhaps the gain is worth the cost. If, however, the app is misused to feed violent fantasy or as a macabre form of entertainment, the victims of which Mandt hopes to bring awareness are at risk of being vandalized and exploited.

Industry experts predict AR/VR technologies becoming mainstream by the end of the decade. With such mass exposure, the risks of depersonalization, derealization and the blurred lines of real and illusory spawned from VR/AR technology build a slippery slope with unknown consequences when paired with gruesome media. Apps like CrimeDoor prod the question: how will mass exposure to those immersive worlds of gore, violence, and murder affect society as a whole?

According to a peer-reviewed article written by James Spiegel and published in Science and Engineering Ethics, “Many of the effects of VR immersion are consistent with the symptoms of depersonalization and derealization dissociative disorders (Aardema et al. 2010). According to the DSM-5 (300.6) depersonalization involves a sense of detachment or unreality of one’s thoughts, feelings, sensations, or actions, while derealization is marked by a sense of detachment or feeling of unreality concerning one’s environment....the risk of depersonalization, as posed by extensive use of VR (Aardema et al. 2006), presents a significant potential ethical problem for VR technology. As for derealization, the sensation that one is living in a dream world, too, is not only a serious psychological condition but also potentially morally and socially problematic” (1538).

In Spiegel’s article, he outlines public policy recommendations for VR/AR technologies. He states that the threats posed by VR technology to mental health, personal autonomy, and personal privacy are threats to the general public and as a matter of public interest, legal regulations to protect these public goods should be implemented (These regulations could include a standardized rating system for VR/AR technologies and minimum age requirements for VR/AR technologies (1544). To date, no distinct rating system applies to VR/AR gaming systems, even though the immersive experience creates different and intensified effects compared to 2-D gaming systems.

There is currently no legislation requiring consent from victim’s families to portray victims in animated reenactments, video games, or AR/VR software. Their tragedies are free from any legal discourse to be made into entertainment and profit. The question of morality in the realm of VR/AR is still a deeply debated one, and the answers to these ethical quandaries will surely unfold over time. The risks and effects of immersive violent or graphic experiences like the ones offered by CrimeDoor remain to be seen. As technology evolves as rapidly as the trend of true-crime, society will have to widen its lens of moral questioning and ask where the lines are drawn at the meeting of tech and murder.

Sources

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