UC SANTA BARBARA

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A Virtual Revolution

In Georges Seurat's masterpiece, "A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte," the artist used millions of dots of color to paint a scene of Parisians at a park along the banks of the River Seine. When it was exhibited for the first time in 1886, the technique — known as pointillism — was revolutionary and sparked a new artistic movement: Neo-Impressionism.

Today, 131 years later, Laila Shereen Sakr, an assistant professor in UC Santa Barbara's Department of Film and Media Studies, is using billions of social media posts to create a revolutionary work of art. Using a program she developed — the R-Shief Media System, which has been collecting and analyzing social media posts since 2008 — she's building a virtual reality (VR) world that gives form to those countless tweets.

"How can we create a cinematic VR production out of these tweets?" Sakr said. "Can we make a VR production that's cinematic using real-time data? Social media in particular seemed very apt. We started thinking, 'What would that cinematic world look like?' "

In the "2018 Arab Future Tripping VR Prototype" Sakr developed, that world looks like it's from another universe. Her cyborg avatar VJ Um Amel — video jockey "mother of hope" in Arabic — moves through a landscape literally animated by tweets. Trees sprout from the ground, each one a virtual manifestation of an individual social media post.

“The shape of the tree is not random,” Sakr explained. “It’s shaped according to the data we’ve structured from our Twitter archive. I am approaching this world-building project using a mix of gaming, sculpture, design and cinematic production methodologies.”

The VR prototype, which was funded with a UCSB Academic Senate Faculty Research Grant, was fueled by 60,000 users who tweeted roughly half a million posts during the Women’s March in January. Developed with the help of her two graduate lab assistants, Intae Hwang and Han-Wei Kung, the VR project is the culmination of Sakr’s latest version of R-Shief. The software, she said, has collected some 30 billion tweets since 2008.

“I’ve got this crazy archive and I want people to be able to know what’s in it,” she said. “So I’m thinking of new modes of knowledge production given the digital form of social media data. How do we produce knowledge based on this primary source? And I’m working my way through this universe knowing that I’m just a tiny explorer on this ship. It’s much bigger than I am; it is humbling.”

Sakr’s VR project comes on the 10th anniversary of creating VJ Um Amel, her digital alter ego. “VJ Um Amel is a name I use in a set of art practices where I explore the implications of placing the identity of ‘mother’ and a techno-feminist construct of ‘cyborg’ within local and transnational expressions of ‘Arab,’ ” she writes in A VJ Manifesto.

To mark the decade, she will also release R-Shief 5.0 and publish a book on Arabic open-source software movement and its role in the Arab uprisings. When the VR project is complete Sakr wants to have an immersive space with multiple screens and projectors. She would also like to see it installed in galleries and museums as a traveling exhibit. In the meantime she faces the daunting task of scaling up the project to its full potential.

“I want to use the entire database,” she said. “Right now I’m just testing. What you see is only a hundred rows of data. It is just the conceptualizing part of the project. After this, we have to build the whole thing.”

About UC Santa Barbara

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