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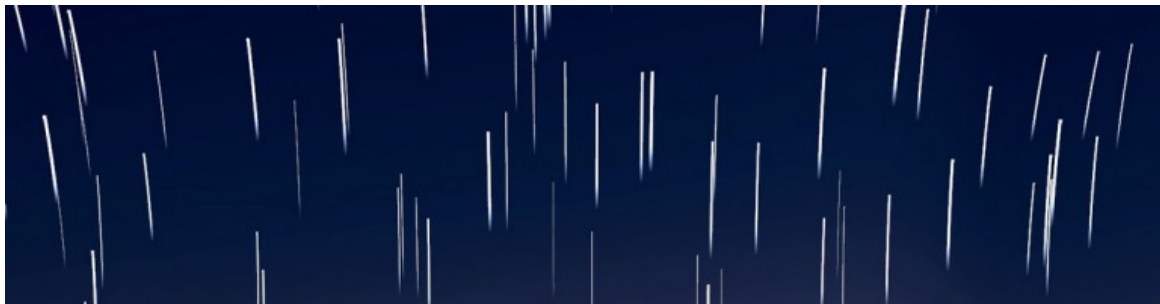ARTICLES   FICTION   GALLERY   VIDEOS   LIBRARY   ABOUT US   SHOP

Missions to the Edge of Inner Space

The re-emergence of virtual reality technology is ushering in a new wave of stylish, minimalistic games that take players on a journey through inner-space.

Futurist notions tend to arrive, dissipate, and then return—like waves on the tide. They retreat when the fledgling technologies they hyperbolize don't live up to expectations. Technology, however, has a way of eventually catching up with our imaginations.

In the early 1990s, virtual reality, or VR, caught the public imagination. The idea was held up by the pop-futurists of the time as a coming revolution. The technology at hand, however, wasn't quite worth the fuss; enormous, heavy headsets with headache-inducing displays and reflecting mirrors weren't nearly worthy of the endless hand-waving and ridiculous mythologizing that VR summoned at the time. VR went hand-in-hand with the public's first quizzical encounters with an equally mysterious World Wide Web. While VR withered into a piece of dated (and slightly embarrassing) science fiction, the web became as commonplace as municipal tap water.

In the 1990s, futurists heralded the imminent arrival of Virtual Reality in gaming. It didn't quite pan out then—but today, it seems to be on our doorstep.

Once shuffled off to the junk drawer of pop-culture fantasy, Virtual Reality is poised to make a comeback—or, rather, its first real appearance. Advances in miniaturization, display resolution and accelerometer accuracy that came with the boom in handheld devices have carried back to the quaint idea of head-mounted stereo-optic displays, with shockingly effective results. The Oculus Rift is such a device: not yet available to the public, a prototype development kit has been distributed to game developers around the world. The device, and all it represents, has been embraced as zealously by independent game artists as it has by the mainstream gaming industry.

While ultra-realistic military simulations and sandbox worlds like *Grand Theft Auto* flood the

"A new and untainted platform, like the Oculus Rift, with its

consumer market and seem to dictate how gaming is understood by the masses, the world of independently-made videogames is creating its own artistic niches. A new and untainted platform, like the Oculus Rift, with its entirely different set of parameters, can provide a space for the independent game community to experiment and thrive.

entirely different set of parameters, can provide a space for the independent game community to experiment and thrive."

For example, minimalist geometric artwork, sometimes called "Low-Poly,"—an aesthetic popular among many indie artists but mostly untouched in mainstream commercial games—is, it turns out, *unnervingly effective* when experienced on the Oculus Rift. Unreal images, when given the perceptual proof of precise head-tracking and convincing 3D, can be much, *much* more evocative than grimy micro-detail. Another important disruptive quality of the 'Rift is that the deeply entrenched game genre of the *first-person-shooter* is wholly ill-suited for it. The dissonance between being able to look around an environment with your head, but then run using a keyboard instead of your real body, makes vertigo a common problem. New play styles are needed, styles which don't heavily rely on the fast-paced running-and-shooting mechanics that are now such an American cultural institution.

MirrorMoon EP Launch Trailer
from **Santa Ragione**

01:55

HD

[MirrorMoon EP Launch Trailer](#) from [Santa Ragione](#) on [Vimeo](#).

The independent Italian game studio [Santa Ragione](#) has spent years working on their stylish space explorer
[Mirrormoon EP](#). The "EP" is a reference to the fact that the game is an extended play of their original short-form
experiment, *MirrorMoon*. This "extended" game begins by placing the player on the surface of a sphere, small
enough to be circumnavigated by foot, *Le Petit Prince* style, in minutes. Overhead, a looming moon can be seen;
gradually, we realize that the ground beneath our "feet" and the object in the sky are one. We can track our
movements overhead on the moon—it's both a map and a mirror, and, eventually, much more.

Once the player has mastered this introduction, they find themselves in front of the beautiful (but almost comically obtuse) controls of a spacecraft. Stylized switches and devices are to be flipped and prodded; almost pointedly, the controls are not accompanied by a manual, or even the handholding of a tutorial. Only trial and error can bring the ship to life. Space outside the cramped pod is vast, and filled with planetoids like the one from the game's opening. Geometric monuments are scattered across these worlds, and all manner of cosmic phenomena surround and flow through them. Some structures are only visible in certain light, and their purpose is uniformly mysterious. In a brilliant bit of magic, you are allowed to name a planet if you are the first to reach it. The universe is likewise full of the cosmic graffiti of hundreds of other explorers. Every few days when this cosmic map is filled with names, it's wiped clean and the naming begins again. This is the closest to interaction with other humans you will experience in the game. The feeling is, generally, the solitude of a lone mountain climber, one who reaches a peak to be rewarded by the fanfare of a silent sunrise.

MirrorMoon EP has, so far, been warmly embraced as a sort of artistic oddity, a throwback to a time when games did not handhold and were necessarily mysterious and unique—just as all games at the dawn of personal computing were mysterious and unique. But an important stage of the game's development should change its standing, as well as the texture of its experience altogether: Santa Ragione have recently received an Oculus Rift developers' kit, and are excitedly planning to bring their game to the device.

"What made us feel that the Oculus Rift was a good match for *MirrorMoon EP*," says studio director Pietro Righi Riva, "is the fact that there is no character in [the game], the protagonist is the player, and it's mostly a meditative, aesthetic, immersive experience about exploring and witnessing, and that is bound to work well with VR. All we worked towards was to immerse the player in this feeling of loneliness and being lost, and I feel that being 'into' it could even accentuate that feeling."
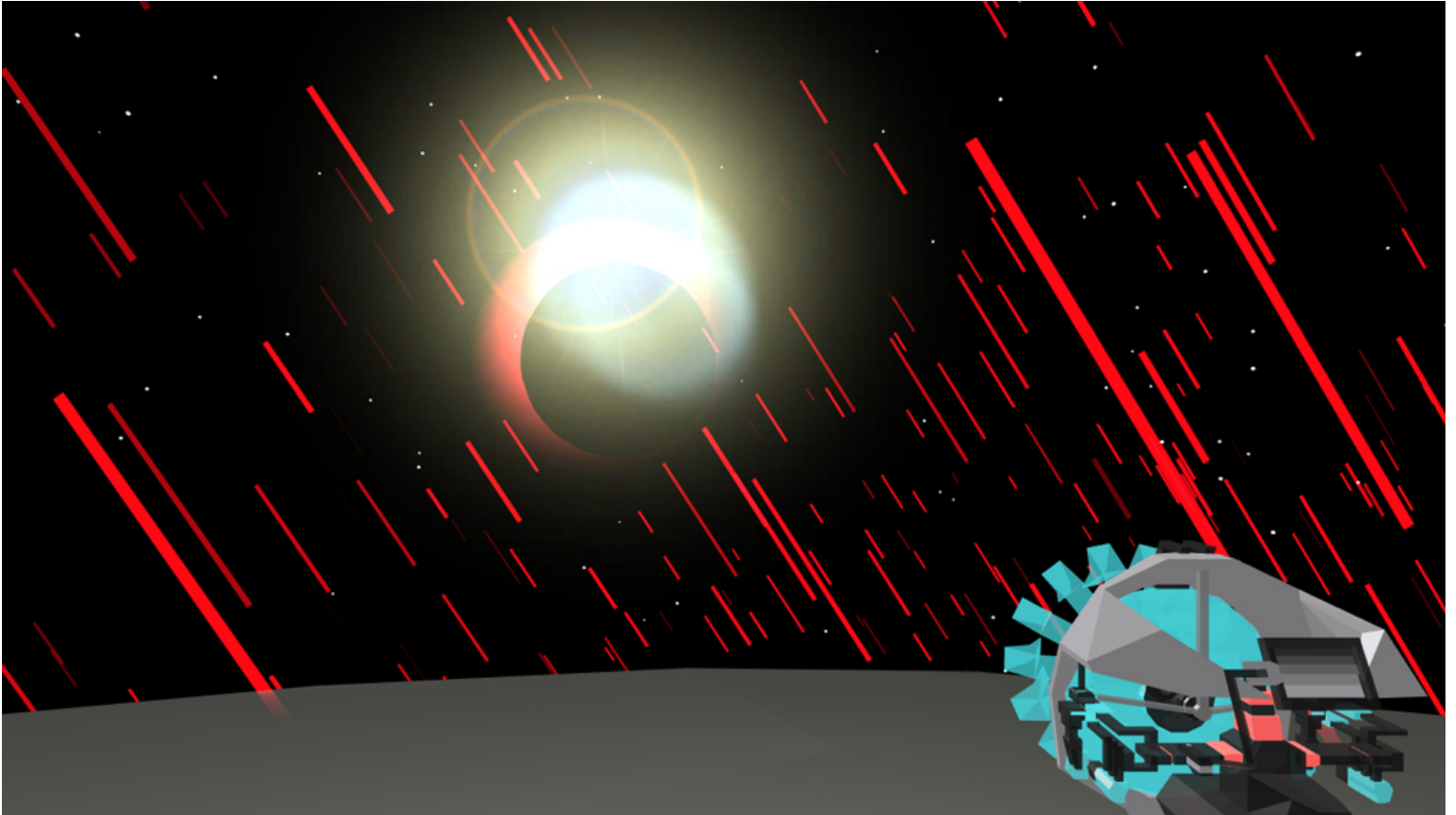
Without laboring the point, the immediacy of virtual reality totally changes expectations when it comes to interactive experiences. A player may find themselves completely satisfied with passively sitting and watching an artificial sunrise in VR, whereas the same spectacle on a screen may leave the average gamer scouring the landscape for weaponry and something to kill. The addition of VR immerses those who are otherwise easily distracted, engaging them in a way against which their their brain has few defenses. The sorts of games that require patience and imagination—or that don't give players a laundry list of objectives to race through with rote, breakneck boredom—may actually get a fighting chance with audiences who may have otherwise turned up their noses.

PANORAMICAL Indiecade 2012 Teaser
from **Fernando Ramallo**

00:56

HD

Fernando Ramallo and David Kanaga's *Panoramical* is especially unusual in that it trades in the expected mice, keyboards and controllers for equipment more familiar to musicians. The game is played with the faders and knobs of a midi sound mixer. In the game, a horizon and an expanse of space are fixed on the screen, and experimenting with the physical controls causes various phenomena to occur: abstract shapes, like weather and geography, form and morph across the limb of the world in view.
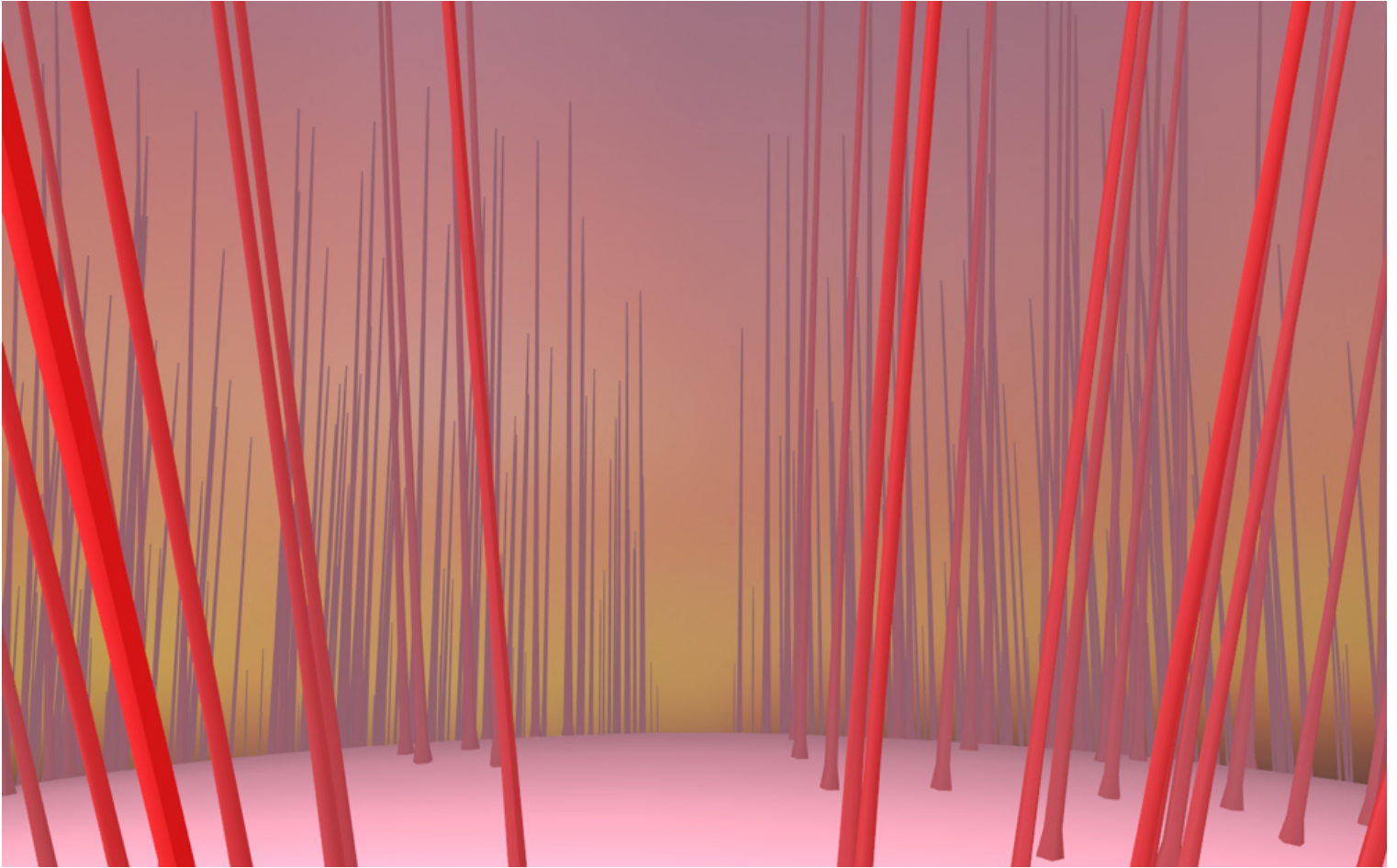
Starlike points streak through the sky, and we begin to experience the feeling of motion; either the sky and ground are rolling by, or we're in orbit. The controls create and mutate not only objects in space, but also musical elements. The game itself is like a generative musical instrument that creates and changes geometry as much as it does sound. *Panoramical* has been both loved by early testers and decried as a "non-game" by entrenched gamers. Again, the late-development addition of immersive VR makes this distinction moot. It becomes not a game but a place. The invisible barrier that marks off imagination from the physical world becomes blurred. This is entering someone else's dream.
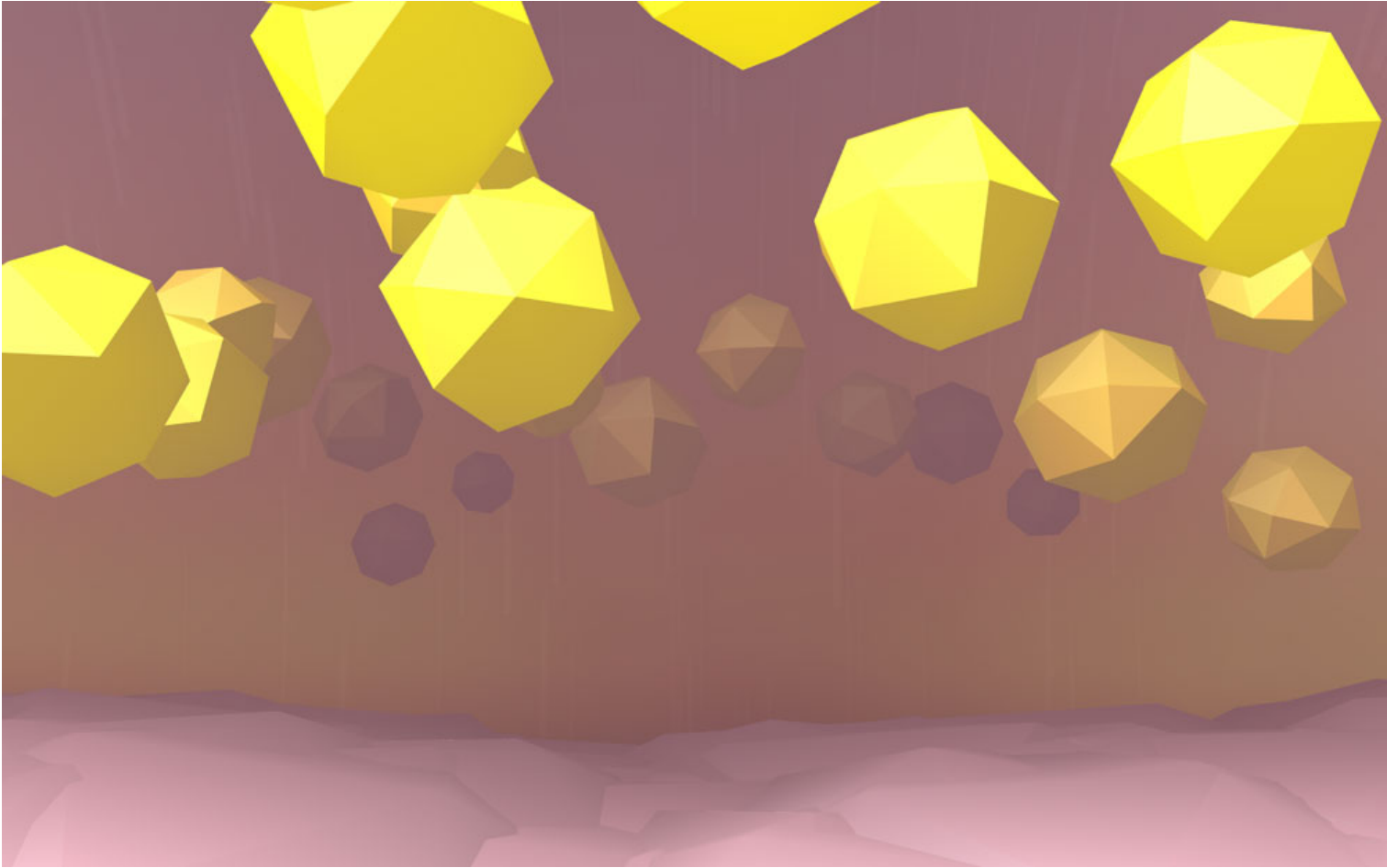
Eleven
from **Christoffer Hedborg**

02:52

HD

Christoffer Hedborg's *Eleven* is a space explorer unchained from any heavenly body. A free-floating space pod explores mysteries in space, while geometric shapes and phenomena mark spacial-relation puzzles that must be solved in order to open shining triangular rifts in space leading to new areas. Comparisons to *2001: A Space Odyssey* come easily, but Hedborg says that he was inspired more by the film's cultural footprint than by the movie itself—and that he hadn't seen the full movie until he was well into production on the game. Early experiments with *Eleven* on the Oculus Rift caused this reaction in a tester.

"*Eleven* felt like a natural fit for Rift." Says Hedborg. "What with its psychedelic visuals, and the lack of up and down that comes with being in space. The game already tries to be very immersive, and offering this full field of view version of the game seemed too good to pass up. I was a little worried that an already potentially nauseating experience would be made even worse (this goes both ways). But once I started working on it I realized that some of my friends who tested it found it less nauseating than Rift games set in more realistic environments. All of the dark backgrounds, with abstract glowing graphics on top make the low resolution of the development kit more bearable too!"

That all three of these games are being developed for play on the Oculus Rift is no accident. Each developer is utilizing the same game-making framework (Unity3d). Because this publicly available set of development tools is supported by the Oculus Rift, all three games are well on the way to being playable in full, immersive virtual space once the device reaches the public. All three teams are meticulous in their art direction, and singleminded in creating immersive, meditative play. These are exactly the games that VR needs to deliver transformative experiences that live up to the embarrassing promises of twenty years ago. In the process, they may upend the notion of what games are, creating virtual universes for their newly-minted explorers.

Tags:Christoffer Hedborg, David Kanaga, Eleven, Fernando Ramallo, Gaming, Indie Gaming, MirrorMoon EP, Oculus Rift, Panoramical, Santa Ragione, Virtual Reality, VR, Wiley Wiggins

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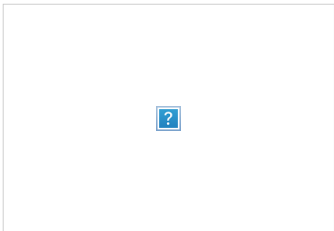
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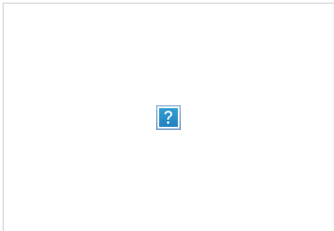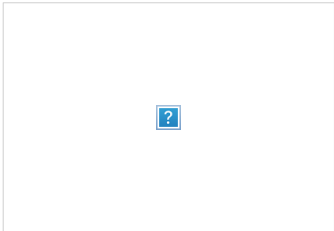
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  Ten Billion

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  Psychic Orchids and Nightmare Origami

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- Wiley Wiggins

  [Wiley Wiggins](#) is the director of the [Fantastic Arcade](#) independent game festival in Austin, Texas. He also stars in Andrew Bujalski's new existential comedy, [Computer Chess.](#)

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