

HTC thinks Christians are VR's next big audience

For a religion that's now over 2,000 years old, Christianity has always worked hard to embrace cutting-edge tech. When Johannes Gutenberg invented the modern printing press in the 15th century, the Christian Church jumped at the opportunity to distribute religious materials more easily, and the Bible became the first major work to be printed by the new technology.

Fast-forward to the 20th century, and the advent of radio, TV, and then the internet saw huge numbers of Christians flock to the nascent technologies. Christian rock emerged to dress conservative religious views in an aesthetic that was more palatable to a new generation of Christians, and Christian video games have been around for nearly as long as video games themselves.

Now, the world's largest religion is turning to virtual reality to spread the word of God. Earlier this year, *Wired* profiled DJ Soto, a preacher who uses the multiplayer service AltspaceVR to preach to a virtual congregation wearing Oculus Rift headsets. In 2016, Jesus VR offered a 40-minute virtual reality retelling of the life and eventual crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

7 Miracles, a film from HTC's own Vive Studios, isn't just the latest example of this trend; it's an acknowledgment on the part of one of the leading headset makers that religion might be a new opportunity for VR.



For all the talk of VR having potential as a social platform, modern headsets are an uncomfortably isolating experience.

Image: Vive Studios

Although billed as the world's first feature-length VR movie, it's more accurate to think of *7 Miracles* as a collection of seven 10-minute-long vignettes, each of them focused on one of Jesus' miracles as described in the Gospel of John. It's nothing if not a straight telling of one of the least controversial portions of the Bible that wouldn't feel out of place as a special attraction in Sunday School.

That wasn't enough to prevent Vive Studios from being able to premiere the film at the Raindance Film Festival earlier this year in London. I was invited along to view three of its seven episodes, all of which should eventually be available for purchase across multiple VR platforms

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In the context of a religion that's constantly turned to new technologies to spread its teaching, *7 Miracles* is nothing

new, nor is it an unusually impressive use of VR. But Vive Studios isn't trying to convert VR enthusiasts into Christians. Instead, it wants to convert Christians into virtual reality believers.

Speaking to Joel Breton, Vive Studios' VP and the film's executive producer, I got the impression that *7 Miracles* could have been about any topic, so long as it appeals to a big audience that's not already filled with VR early adopters. Find a topic that appeals to this group, and you can get them to try VR once. Get them to try VR once, he theorizes, and "they've got a very good chance of trying it again."

It turns out the "billions" of Christians worldwide make for the perfect test case. "When I look at where's my target audience, that's a nice audience to be engaged with," Breton concluded.

In its best moments '7 Miracles' proceeds with the excitement and flow of a stage play

Knowing he wanted to target this audience, Breton then approached Panogramma, a Brazilian VR production company led by Rodrigo Cerqueira, who had been producing VR content since 2015. Over time, the project morphed into what would become *7 Miracles*, with Cerqueira handling directing duties.

The result is a film devoid of blood, politics, and really of much in the way of conflict at all. It's content to simply retell the popular stories rather than attempt to comment on them. The first episode, for example, is set at the Marriage at Cana, where Jesus turned water into wine. It's a story that's so well-known that it's basically become a cliché as an event that's seen as shorthand for Christ's divine powers, and yet, *7 Miracles* plays it completely straight. The camera sits among the disciples as they eat at the feast, we see Jesus instruct the servants to fill containers with water, and we're eventually treated to a slow-motion shot of water turning red as it pours out into a cup.

[embedded content]

This straight-laced approach repeated itself across the rest of the episodes I watched. You're not seeing the radical teachings and politics of Jesus Christ during the time of the Roman Empire. Instead, you're watching a story told in a format that you probably wouldn't think twice about showing to children. (Cerqueira describes children as "visual creatures" who are ideally suited to being taught the word of Christ through the medium of VR, even if the hardware limitations of headsets make it inappropriate for the youngest of them.)

As a non-believer with little sentimental attachment to these stories, it was hard for me to engage completely with the film's down-the-line approach to its source material, but there's definitely something to be said for the medium of VR.

'7 Miracles' steps away from Christianity's historical traditions by being an isolating experience

In its best moments, as Jesus addresses crowds filled with followers and skeptics alike, *7 Miracles* proceeds with the excitement and flow of a stage play. There's a definite focal point to the action, but turning your head rewards you with additional detail, allowing you to build up a more complete picture of the scene. Also, though multiple versions of the film will be available for different VR hardware, the version we were watching on our Vive Focus headsets wasn't nearly as blurry as other 360 videos I've watched in the past.

At its worst, the technical limitations of 360 video became clear. Audio was a particular problem; I'd turn my head to one side to look for the source of a bit of dialogue, only to have the sound move with my head and completely de-sync with where it was supposed to be in the scene. The stitching between the two sides of the 360 video would also become painfully obvious at certain points, especially when actors moved across them.

Where *7 Miracles* really steps away from Christianity's

historical traditions is in how isolating the experience is. Yes, you can read a Bible on your own, but they're just as useful for preachers giving sermons to others. Televisions and radios are at their best when they're communal activities, and Christian rock concerts... well, you get the idea.



7 Miracles plays its source material completely straight, such as this scene set at the Marriage at Cana.

Image: Vive Studios

But for all the talk of VR having potential as a social platform, modern headsets are an uncomfortably isolating experience, with communal arcade experiences like *The Void* being the exception rather than the rule. Despite the fact that I ostensibly experienced *7 Miracles* alongside 20 other journalists in a cinema setting, which is likely to be much more communal than how most other people will watch it, I felt entirely alone. It was unsettling knowing that people were around me while my vision was obscured. Occasionally, I'd feel a member of staff brush by my legs, and the gentle murmur of conversation and camera shutters cut straight through the in-ear headphones I was provided with to watch the film.

Converting Christians to virtual reality might be the much harder job

If I was worried about someone messing with me while my vision was obscured, I shouldn't have been. When I finally emerged, blinking in the cinema's lights as I returned to reality, the only thing that had been changed in my surroundings was my water bottle, which was quietly switched for a bottle of wine while I was occupied by watching the film. But I didn't get the opportunity to bond with others the way a cinema audience bonds over the course of a movie or a congregation bonds after a church service, even though DJ Soto's use of AltspaceVR to bring Christians together in worship shows how such a thing might be possible.

Both Breton and Cerqueira are clear that they don't want to use *7 Miracles* to try to convert people to Christianity (although Cerqueira thinks it "definitely has the power" under the right circumstances). Converting Christians to virtual reality might actually be the much harder job. Yes, Christians like and engage with the stories and lessons contained within the two Testaments in the Bible, but the shared community of experiencing and understanding their lessons is just as important, if not more so.

I am not a Christian, but that's not to say that I don't see the appeal in religion. Although the stories the Bible has to tell hold little appeal for me, the sense of community and togetherness does. But though well-produced in places, *7 Miracles* offers the former without the latter. The Christian appetite for new technologies might historically be big, but I don't know if *7 Miracles* is the film that's going to convert them.

<https://www.theverge.com/2018/12/16/18139134/htc-vive-studios-7-miracles-focus-virtual-reality-movie-raindance-film-festival>