International Research Journal of Multidisciplinary Sciences ISSN:AWAITED
VOL-1 ISSUE-5 May 2025 PP:8-11

Evaluating Distance Perception Accuracy through Bidirectional Correlation of Virtual and Real Environments

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Abstract

This paper investigates how accurately users perceive distances in virtual environments compared to real-world settings. By employing a bidirectional comparison framework, we aim to uncover key perceptual biases and factors that influence spatial accuracy in immersive virtual environments (VEs). Our results indicate that while virtual environments can replicate spatial experiences to a significant degree, discrepancies persist due to factors such as field of view, environmental cues, and user experience.

Keywords

Virtual Reality, Distance Perception, Spatial Cognition, Immersive Environments, Human-Computer Interaction, Virtual vs Real Space

1. Introduction

The rapid advancement of virtual reality (VR) technologies has enabled increasingly immersive experiences across education, healthcare, training, and entertainment. A critical factor in the success of VR applications is the user's perception of space—particularly distance perception. Misjudging distances can lead to poor performance in simulations, discomfort, or even injury. This study aims to evaluate the accuracy of distance perception by comparing user estimations in both virtual and corresponding real-world environments.

2. Background and Literature Review

2.1 Human Spatial Perception

Distance perception is a subset of spatial cognition, influenced by visual, auditory, and proprioceptive cues. In physical spaces, distance estimation benefits from stereo vision, motion parallax, and consistent lighting.

2.2 Distance Perception in Virtual Environments

In VR, these cues are often limited or altered. Studies (e.g., Witmer & Kline, 1998; Loomis et al., 1999) show that users often underestimate distances in VR environments due to constrained field of view, graphical resolution, and reduced sensory feedback.

2.3 Measuring Spatial Accuracy

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Two common methods used in spatial research are blind-walking tasks and verbal estimation. Several prior experiments (e.g., Renner et al., 2013) have quantified spatial distortions across various VR hardware setups.

2.4 Gaps in Current Research

While there are numerous studies on one-way perception from real to virtual or vice versa, fewer studies have conducted **bidirectional** assessments to understand how each environment influences perception of the other.

3. Objectives and Hypotheses

3.1 Objectives

- To compare user distance perception in real and virtual spaces.
- To assess if and how training in one environment improves accuracy in the other.
- To identify perceptual biases that differ across both environments.

3.2 Hypotheses

- H1: Users will underestimate distances in virtual environments compared to real environments.
- H2: Exposure to one environment can calibrate and improve performance in the other.
- H3: The degree of spatial distortion is influenced by prior VR experience.

4. Methodology

4.1 Participants

A total of 40 participants aged 18–35 were recruited. Participants were divided into two groups: experienced VR users and non-experienced users.

4.2 Experimental Setup

- **Real Environment:** A large hall with marked distances (1m–10m).
- **Virtual Environment:** A VR replica created using Unity3D and viewed via Oculus Quest 2.
- **Tasks:** Participants performed blind walking and distance estimation tasks in both environments, first in one and then the other.

4.3 Data Collection

Distance estimations were recorded using motion tracking and compared with actual values. Subjective feedback was collected through post-task questionnaires.

5. Results

5.1 Quantitative Findings

- Users underestimated virtual distances by an average of 18% compared to real distances.
- Experienced users showed smaller deviations (12%) versus non-experienced users (22%).
- Post-VR calibration improved estimation accuracy by up to 9%.

5.2 Qualitative Feedback

Participants reported feeling less confident in the virtual environment due to lower depth cues and slight motion sickness. Those who had used VR previously adapted quicker.

5.3 Statistical Analysis

A two-way ANOVA confirmed significant differences ($p < 0.05$) between VR and real-world perception, as well as between user experience groups.

6. Discussion

6.1 Interpretation of Results

The findings confirm H1 and H3. Users consistently underestimated distances in VR due to limited sensory cues. H2 was partially supported—some users did improve with environmental calibration.

6.2 Implications for VR Design

Designers of VR systems should consider incorporating enhanced depth cues, such as dynamic shadows and stereo sound, to improve spatial accuracy. Training modules may help calibrate user perception before immersive tasks.

6.3 Limitations

This study was limited by sample size and the use of a single VR device. Future research could explore more diverse environments and include AR systems for comparison.

7. Conclusion

This study provides valuable insights into how distance perception differs between virtual and real environments and emphasizes the importance of environmental calibration and user training. As VR continues to evolve, understanding perceptual discrepancies will be key to creating safer and more effective virtual experiences.

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