



Technology & The Arts, Vol. 1

“To be truly countercultural in a time of tech hegemony, one has to, above all, betray the platform which may come in the form of betraying or divesting from your public online self.” - Caroline Busta from [“The internet didn’t kill counterculture—you just won’t find it on Instagram”](#)

1. Welcome to the first edition of Technology & The Arts (TATA), a monthly missive with a mission to inspire artistic expression through emerging technologies like VR, AR, AI, and more.
2. [Social media sucks](#). It may be a necessary evil for many, though it makes a space like TATA that much more important. A place not polluted by algorithms and advertising.
3. TATA will celebrate the impractical and visionary and connect disparate dots within the tech ecosystem that lead to creative and wondrous breakthroughs. Most new technologies are driven by the greed of profit and war making. It’s the human centered use cases, though, that in the long run - infused with storytelling and social impact - that end up mattering most.
4. Here, you will get updates on new projects in that ilk, along with an analysis of what is cool in the ever-widening landscape of immersive storytelling, with a healthy dose of some random musings on culture and art. All brought to you by yours truly, [Gabo Arora](#), and the team

at [LightShed](#), in partnership with [Johns Hopkins University's Immersive Storytelling & Emerging Technologies \(ISET\) Lab](#).

5. I began my journey with immersive technologies, in 2014, at the [United Nations](#), using VR as a new way to tell documentary stories. VR's purpose at that time was proclaimed to be for games and military simulation trainings. Anything otherwise was met with skepticism. Yet [Clouds Over Sidra](#), and the inspiring work of a community of like minded creators transformed the possibilities for VR. It became a medium that explored our emotional depths as humans; connecting us to people and their stories in new ways.
6. The exposure to a new technology and a community of creators working within it made all the difference. My hope is similar with TATA. That it provides encouragement and community, and fundamentally changes our perspective on the purpose and possibilities for new technologies like VR though also AR and AI. And whatever else is next on the horizon.
7. We have come a long way since 2014, when I, along with [Barry Pousman](#), ventured into a Syrian refugee camp with a custom built camera provided by [Chris Milk](#)'s team (held together by duct tape), to tell the story of a young girl named Sidra.
8. Working with emerging technologies is always tough, even if it is exciting. You need to master a new technology, a new form, and then fit within it a new storytelling grammar. There is a lot of failure. Though when it works, there is nothing quite like it, with the sensations it creates within you and others. [Here](#) is a 10 minute video essay keynote "Where is a Friend's Home?" that was at UNITY's social impact summit this past Fall, where I talk about my journey in immersive storytelling and where I think it is going. It's not boring, I promise.

9. Ah, the pandemic. It's not over and consistently humbles the best laid plans. It was also a revelation on so many emotional fronts. I spent most of those early days in Brooklyn with my wife. For weeks on end, the sound of ambulances lulled our sleep, or lack of it. During a week of peak death for the city, around the end of March 2020, we found out we were going to have a baby. We named him Phoenix. He was born in December 2020. I wrote this [essay](#), "The Other Side of Grief" around that time and wanted to share it with those that have loved and suffered, lost and overcome.
10. There is a renewed urgency around racial justice that I hope sustains itself. The future of all of us depends on it. A case eloquently made by my friend Heather McGhee in her new [book](#) - which will have lasting policy impact - that takes the example of a community swimming pool as a metaphor, to illuminate how racism impoverishes us all.
11. We have a NEW PROJECT, given the urgency of this issue, to address racial bias using immersive tech. It's a VR training for social workers that uses AI to examine how race works in child welfare decisions. The preliminary data we have on testing this with social workers across the US (in Ohio and Indiana currently) is fascinating. We are developing a case study on the impact of the project though if you would like to experience the final project, we can share an APK for the Oculus Quest.
12. The role of technology and extremism are inextricably linked to the future of our democracy. This is a conversation that is coming to the fore, and not just in the US. I am happy to announce that, along with the team at LightShed, in partnership with Conde Nast Studios and the head of studios of WIRED, I am developing a documentary on extremist Hindu groups in India. Based on this [article](#) in WIRED that illustrates how social media and other cutting edge technologies are weaponized to survey and kill minority groups in India. I look

forward to sharing updates and hopefully to begin shooting later this year, Inshallah.

13. This is the worst of times, in many ways, though also be the best of times for personal transformation. I talk about this on the “[Stories of Transformation](#)” podcast which I highly recommend. Probably the most personal interview I have ever done, that weaves together the purpose of the work I get to do, along with the influence of growing up in Queens. Weird how things you never think or talk about come flooding in through the framing and the ritual of the “interview”.
14. Speaking of transformation, some incredible [studies](#) are coming out on the power of psilocybin and other psychedelics to treat mental illness. The world leader in this burgeoning field are our friends at the [Johns Hopkins University Psychedelics lab](#). It’s supported by [Tim Ferris](#), so it must be good.
15. I am proud to announce that Johns Hopkins University ISET (the program I head) and LightShed are now partnering with Johns Hopkins Psychedelics to integrate VR into numerous Psilocybin clinical trials. We just received [IRB](#) approval, to our knowledge the first-ever anywhere, to begin working on patients with Depression and Alzheimers. Here are our [design principles](#) and a [one-pager](#) on the details of this trial and our hope for future outcomes. I am also excited to be collaborating with [David Lobser](#) again, who, as a research fellow in my lab at Johns Hopkins ISET, is supporting these efforts. We will provide updates as this project progresses, though a lot of why VR is important in psychedelic research has to do with the idea of “set and setting” pioneered by Dr. Andrew Weil in a book that changed my life many years ago, [The Natural Mind](#). I also recommend his podcast [interview](#) here in case you don’t read anymore.
16. I share Werner Herzog’s entitled opinion that the best way to be a great filmmaker / artist is to read and walk. Exercising the mind and

body always lifts the spirit of creativity. The best thing I read during lockdown was “[My Year of Rest and Relaxation](#)” which really took on another meaning altogether in the pandemic. It is poignant, funny, satirical and - in my mind - an instant classic for our age. I also read “[Tender Is the Night](#)” by F. Scott Fitzgerald, which allowed my mind to form its own personal cinema as most cinemas were closed when I read it, and I missed the movies. Speaking of which, I [cried](#) watching *La Strada* when the Film Forum opened up a couple of weeks back. I also recently read Benjamin Mooser’s [Bio On Sontag](#), and it brought back an era when artists and intellectuals were as important as rock and roll stars. I also read [Woody Allen’s Memoir](#) and in a fit of depression read [Matthew McConaughey’s memoir](#) and felt a whole lot better. Currently I’m finally reading [Everything is Cinema by Richard Brody](#), his bio on Jean Luc Godard.

17. For music, I listen non stop to the real commercial-free-listener-supported radio ([WQXR](#) and the [Columbia jazz station](#)) and vinyl with this set up [here](#). And in the digital realm was enthralled by [Nicolas Jaar](#) and my former high school crush, [Fiona Apple](#).
18. JOIN ME on Monday, May 17, 2021 at 4:00 PM EDT. In an open to all online seminar with Ryan Green where we will discuss the future of the video game medium. For over 40 years, the presiding cultural narrative is that video games are simply a means to escape the grind of life through play. Often they are derided as a mechanism to waste time, or a hobby best left to childhood. Through choosing to encode the echo of his son’s life in videogame form, Ryan and his collaborators discovered that videogames can convey players into sacred spaces; spaces where players can mourn, find catharsis, examine deeply held convictions, and emerge transformed through their willingness to share in the suffering of others. Register [here](#).
19. That’s it. Thanks for reading TATA. Please reach out if any of these themes, topics, or projects strike a chord. Always looking to nerd out

and really looking for new ways to connect sans social media and big tech getting between us. Read [Jaron Lanier](#), keep healthy, love your loved ones and hopefully see many of you in-person soon. I just moved to Brooklyn Heights and spend most of my time in the crazy amazing piers at [Brooklyn Bridge Park](#), so please send a message if you would like to walk and frolic in this newfound Spring.

Much Love,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Jaron".