

Virtual Virtue

Walter, an IRS agent, has his life changed by a brand new virtual reality experience that allows users to virtually go back in time in the role of a tax collector and meet Jesus Christ.

FADE IN:

Darkness. A soft revving sound, like a computer turning on. Slowly, in dissolves:

EXT. DIRT ROAD, TOWN SQUARE- DAY

We look out toward the open road from the point of view of an unseen individual. The point of view is shaky and disoriented. We sit at a table underneath an awning propped up by tree branches.

We look down at the table. SCROLLS. REED PENS. GOLD COINS, shimmering in the hot sun. We wear scratchy wool robes.

A CITIZEN approaches and reluctantly drops a leather coin pouch on the table.

CITIZEN

My dues....

He spits on the ground near our feet.

CITIZEN (CONT'D)

... and my gift to Caesar.

A group of people crowd the road nearly 100 feet away from us, moving closer and closer. Excited shouts rise from the group. The citizen, with a complete shift in attitude, rushes toward the crowd and beckons others to follow.

CITIZEN (CONT'D)

The rumors are true. I didn't think he would ever travel this way. I have heard amazing things--

As we approach, everyone is trying to get a look at something in the middle of the crowd, but it is impossible for us because everyone is at least a foot taller in stature than our point of view.

TOWNSPEOPLE in the crowd push us away.

TOWNSPERSON 1

Filthy tax collector.

TOWNSPERSON 2

Don't you have lives to ruin elsewhere?

We back into something solid- a TREE. The tree has a slight glow. The branches are arranged in such a way to make it a perfect climbing tree.

We climb.

From the higher vantage point, we see clearly that everyone is clamoring to be close to a MAN. When we see him, the world slows to a crawl. The man turns and looks up at us. Even though the crowd never stops shouting, we hear his voice as if it were right next to our ear.

MAN

Come down from there, Walter.

Everything around us and the man melts away. We float to the floor of what has turned into a:

INT. LARGE ROOM MADE OF WHITE MARBLE.

The man glides toward us with a smile gracing his dark, rugged face under his thick beard. His eyes welcome us like an old friend.

MAN

It's so good to finally meet you.

Suddenly the man freezes- still as stone. A woman's VOICE booms around the room.

VOICE (O.S.)

Session expired.

The virtual reality headset is removed, revealing that we are in the:

INT. VIRTUAL REALITY ARENA, DAY

The room is the size of a small gymnasium, complete with a false tree with climbing rungs, false stone-textured walls and floors, and heat lamps surrounding the playing area.

WALTER attempts to recover from the shocking experience he has been removed from. He is a small man with a small presence. He turns to SIMON, the tall game operator with a crew cut, who has just removed Walter's headset.

WALTER

That's it? But I didn't get to--

SIMON

Hey, we got a long line of people who have been patiently waiting their turn. You took a full ten minutes to suit up beforehand.

Walter looks down at his one-piece motion-capture-esque TACTILE SUIT. It is a bit baggy on him.

WALTER

But... you didn't have my size.
Please sir, I didn't even get to
say a word.

SIMON

Follow the green arrows on the
floor to the exit. Make sure to
remove your wristband.

WALTER

But SIR...

CUT TO:

INT. ANTECHAMBER/EXIT ROOM, DAY

Walter folds his tactile suit and places it within one of the many shelving units. He removes his plastic neon wristband and almost places it on the shelf, but decides to put it in his pocket instead.

INT. MUSEUM LOBBY, A MOMENT LATER

Walter exits the antechamber and walks past the line of people waiting to enter the VR Arena. A glowing sign above the entrance reads: "THE TAX COLLECTOR ENCOUNTER" with the subtitle: "EXPERIENCE CHRIST FIRSTHAND." Patrons swipe their wristbands on an electric turnstile to gain access to the room, like in an amusement park.

Walter shoves his hands into his pockets and hurries out the front door.

EXT. MUSEUM, EARLY MORNING

AERIAL: The large museum sits beach-side.

Walter walks out the front door and past the large stone sign with the etched words "THE NEW CREATION MUSEUM: FLORIDA."

He approaches CAROL sunbathing by the water.

WALTER

Where are the kids?

Carol points to a nearby kids play-area complete with climbable statues of dinosaurs and biblical figures.

Jets of water periodically shoot out of the statues' mouths. Walter catches a glimpse of MARIE, his 8-year-old daughter, and ZACH, his 5-year-old son. They jump in and out of puddles, laughing.

Walter sits in the sand next to Carol.

CAROL

How was it?

WALTER

Carol, I've never seen anything like it. The level of realism is out of this world.

Carol looks out toward the ocean, unenthused.

CAROL

Hm.

WALTER

But they didn't let me finish! I was only in the experience for five minutes and then he was right in front of me and he was looking at me... like no one ever has before...

Carol is packing up their beach bag. Walter tries unsuccessfully to meet her eyes.

WALTER (CONT'D)

You still don't want to give it a shot? I know you have your opinions about it, but--

CAROL

I told you, I don't care if you do it or not, but I still think it's disrespectful to combine religious sacrament with technology like that. Let's go home, I think I'm getting burned.

WALTER

It's not sacrament, it's... they've reached a level where I nearly forgot who I was, where I was. This thing could change the future of religion.

CAROL

Honey. IRS agents are not in a good position to talk theology.

WALTER

The whole experience is from the point of view of a tax collector.

Carol and Walter get up. She is roughly six inches taller than him. They walk toward the kids area.

CAROL

If you suddenly want to talk to Jesus so badly, maybe you should consider changing to a career where you don't piss people off every time you're assigned an audit.
Zach! Marie!

The children approach their parents, dejected and soaked. Walter kneels to dry Marie with a towel.

MARIE

Why don't we come here every day?

WALTER

(also dejected)
That'd be nice, wouldn't it?

Walter's neon wristband falls out of his pocket. He grabs it before Carol sees.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. IRS OFFICE, THE NEXT DAY

Walter sits at his desk, staring into space, clicking a pen absentmindedly. The surface of the desk is a touchscreen computer interface where Walter has drawn a shoddy rendering of Jesus's face in Photoshop CC 2038.

He swipes the drawing to the side of his screen and googles "tax collector encounter." Multiple news headlines pop up: "CREATION MUSEUM CONTROVERSY," "TECHNOLOGICAL HERESY?," "BREAKING: MUSEUM ANNOUNCES EARLY CLOSURE OF NEW EXHIBIT."

Walter sighs and massages his temples.

Suddenly, a WOMAN storms in the door and sees Walter. She approaches the desk and slams down a piece of paper. She furiously chews a piece of gum.

ANGRY WOMAN

You're the one that audited me last month.

WALTER

... yes.

ANGRY WOMAN

A 40% penalty, huh? Do you realize how badly that will tank my business? My life?

WALTER

(quietly)

I'm sorry, ma'am, but the numbers show that you were clearly mishandling your--

ANGRY WOMAN

I was doing what I needed to provide for my family.

A soft *ping* from his computer. A pleasant female voice:

COMPUTER

Audit assignment: Picket Fence Floral Arrangements, West 13th Street.

ANGRY WOMAN

Oh, don't let me stop you from going to ruin someone else's life.

WALTER

Ma'am, I don't ruin people's--

ANGRY WOMAN

Oh yeah? When's the last time someone was happy to see you show up?

She spits her gum on the floor by his desk, clearly missing the trash can. As she turns to storm out of the office, she mutters:

ANGRY WOMAN (CONT'D)

Christ.

Walter watches her leave, then puts his head down in his hands. He looks down through his fingers at the computer screen which flashes the notification for the floral business audit. Then he looks at the other side of his screen with the news headlines about the museum. Then lastly, at his terrible drawing of Jesus.

Then in a flash, he swipes everything off his screen, enters the IRS database, and types the keywords "Creation Museum."

EXT. CREATION MUSEUM, THAT EVENING

Walter walks toward the front door with a briefcase in hand.

INT. MUSEUM LOBBY

As Walter walks in, an employee rushes over to him across the otherwise empty lobby.

EMPLOYEE

I'm sorry sir, but we are closing.

WALTER

I'm with the IRS. I was assigned to review your tax records. Tonight.

EMPLOYEE

IRS? I didn't know that we were--

WALTER

Could I talk to your manager?

EMPLOYEE

Um... I don't know, it's been a little crazy for him today with everything going on... wait here a moment and I'll ask him.

The employee walks quickly toward the back of the darkened lobby. Once they disappear from sight, Walter rushes toward the still-glowing sign: "THE TAX COLLECTOR ENCOUNTER."

Walter tries the handle. Locked. He looks around the lobby, starting to panic. Then his eyes widen. He grabs the wristband from his pocket and swipes it over the electric turnstile. It glows green and the door unlocks.

INT. VIRTUAL REALITY ARENA, EVENING

The Arena is in the same arrangement. Headsets and tactile suits are arranged neatly in shelves along the wall.

Knowing he doesn't have much time, Walter rushes to put on a suit. He doesn't find the one he wore earlier, so he settles for an even baggier size than before.

He throws a VR headset on. Darkness.

WALTER

Come on, come on...

He pushes buttons haphazardly on the side of the headset and lights begin to flash. A sleek menu appears ahead of Walter. Using eye movements, he selects "PLAY FROM BEGINNING."

The heat lamps begin to glow, but Walter can't see them because he is back at:

EXT. DIRT ROAD, TOWN SQUARE- DAY

The same table. The same scratchy clothes.

The citizen approaches and drops a coin pouch on the table.

CITIZEN

My dues....

He spits on the ground.

CITIZEN (CONT'D)

... and my gift to Caesar.

Walter tries to walk toward the approaching crowd, but the citizen stops him with a hand. The tactile suit exerts pressure on Walter's chest.

WALTER

Let me go, I don't have time.

CITIZEN

(unaffected)

Filthy tax collector.

The citizen turns toward the approaching crowd.

CITIZEN (CONT'D)

The rumors are true. I didn't think...

As soon as the citizen removes his hand, Walter rushes toward the tree and climbs it quickly- too quickly. The crowd is still making its way toward the tree.

WALTER

Come on...

Finally the crowd arrives at the base of the tree. Jesus turns and looks up.

JESUS

Come down from there, Walt.

Everything melts away. We float to the floor of what has again turned into a:

INT. LARGE ROOM MADE OF WHITE MARBLE.

Jesus approaches with his rugged smile and welcoming eyes.

JESUS

It's so good to finally meet you.

Walter is still. He didn't think he'd get this far.

WALTER

Hi.

JESUS

Hello.

WALTER

How are you?

JESUS

I am doing quite well. Though I did not expect my second coming to be anything like this.

Walter lets out a loud, surprised laugh.

WALTER

I didn't expect you to be... funny.

JESUS

What is on your mind, child?

WALTER

Well, um... so I'm in taxes. My career. Is taxes.

Jesus chuckles lightly.

WALTER (CONT'D)

I was just wondering if I could get some advice on... purpose? Life's purpose? I don't know if I'm ever doing the right thing because people are always hating me for doing my job.

JESUS

Hm.

WALTER

The look you gave me yesterday was a look I haven't seen in a while.

Jesus chuckles again, with the same smile.

WALTER (CONT'D)

And I know you liked tax collectors back in your day even though everyone else hated them.

JESUS

Hm.

WALTER

So I guess I just wanted to see if you had anything to say to me.

JESUS

You know I love you no matter what, right?

WALTER

(genuinely moved)

Oh... well, thank you. It's really nice to hear that.

JESUS

Yes. Until the end of time.

WALTER

Wow.

Walter stands in silence for a moment.

WALTER (CONT'D)

That is, uh, really kind. And I think that's what I needed.

JESUS

Yes.

WALTER

So what else can you tell me? I feel like you must have plenty of crazy stories, right?

JESUS

Yes. Though I did not expect my second coming to be anything like this.

Walter is confused, but chuckles nonetheless.

WALTER

Um... yeah. What other great religious stuff do you have to share with the modern world?

JESUS
What is on your mind, child?

WALTER
What?

Jesus chuckles.

Walter's face falls.

JESUS
You know I love you no matter what,
right?

Walter looks into Jesus's beautiful, unchanging eyes. It was too good to be true.

WALTER
Thanks anyway.

He removes the headset and stands in the middle of the room, looking around at the set and props.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. HOUSE ON A NEIGHBORHOOD CUL-DE-SAC, DUSK

Walter pulls up in the driveway. A small but sturdy tree sits in the middle of the otherwise empty yard.

INT. WALTER'S CAR

He sits in his seat for a moment after cutting the engine. He slowly grabs his briefcase from the passenger seat.

EXT. CAR

As Walter closes the door of his car, he hears the rustling of leaves and laughter.

Marie and Zach are climbing the tree in the yard. He approaches the tree and looks up.

He begins to climb after them.

FADE TO BLACK.

THE END.