

Name of Project:

Sim Sim

List three words that describe your proposal:

VR

Carpentry

Startup

One-sentence description of the work for which you are seeking support:

Can a tech startup be art?

Full description of the proposed project (500 word maximum):

Sim Sim (short for *Simulation Simulation*) is a performance of conscious capitalism, in the form of a real/fake tech startup called *FTW, Inc.* (a.k.a. *Fix the World, Incorporated*), whose flagship product is a virtual reality carpentry simulator (called *Carpentry Simulator*).

FTW got its start in 2019 with seed-funding from angel investor group *LACMA*, which had just put out a call for non-traditional ventures in emerging technologies and exploratory ideas. *FTW* answered this call with a novel idea: that the virtual world could literally build a better *real world* -- here and now.

FTW founder J. L. Edwards got the idea while repairing a shed in his backyard, not long after losing his job as a site assistant for a high-end residential construction company in Portland, Oregon. It had been a month since the last time he had used a power tool, and he was already losing muscle memory. As he lay a 2x4 across his left foot and held a circular saw in his right hand, Edwards was suddenly struck by the uncanny, disembodied sensation that he was not, in fact, repairing a shed -- but inside a virtual reality simulation of repairing a shed.

After a dream about a *DeWalt*-branded VR game later that month, the idea crystallized: use virtual reality to teach basic carpentry skills. *Carpentry Simulator* would be a free-to-play, gamified teaching tool -- not a traditional video game, exactly, but not a musty instructional seminar, either. To build a wall, the player would have to physically reach for a tape measure, make their marks, cut lumber and plywood, hook a nail gun up to a compressor, and pop each individual nail in place. Players could work together, teaching or learning as they go, give feedback, and share ideas and designs. It would

be supported by in-game purchases and advertisements (much like *Fortnite* or Facebook), which, respectively, could enhance their workflow within the simulation and provide home improvement resources in the real world. Essentially, *Carpentry Simulator* was *This Old House* by way of *Minecraft*.

As a “game”, it occupies a singular position in the VR market -- not only for leveraging the strengths of the medium (its uncompromising commitment to total immersion), or overlapping neatly with the subject of its representation (the *embodied* experience of carpentry and construction work), but for giving VR a uniquely compelling *raison d'être*: not to take people further away from the real world, but to bring them closer to it. Maybe VR had finally found its killer app -- and it had nothing to do with killing.

As a game *business*, *FTW* was innovative for another reason: it walks the walk. Apart from maintaining basic operational and development capacities, all of its proceeds go to humanitarian housing organizations -- Habitat for Humanity, Red Cross, Mercy Corps, UNHCR. This is utopian tech evangelism *actually* delivering on its promise of a better world -- not by virtue of brute force marketing or hopelessly internalized branding, but *literally* by building it.

FTW -- Fix the World -- For the Win.

Please include a bio of the principal artist or collective who will be responsible for this project (this may be in the form of a CV):

Please describe the artistic or creative merit of the proposed project (250 word maximum):

I am by no means the first to lay claim to this idea -- although, for what it's worth, I did find the following essay only *after* I'd begun research for this project. In 2017, Ian Bogost wrote an article for the *Atlantic* called “Tech Start-Ups Have Become Conceptual Art,” in which he describes many of the same ideas I've attempted to articulate here. Key among them are the following observations:

“Hirst and Banksy have a point: Cashing in on art might have become a necessary feature of art. The problem with scoffing at money is that money drives so much of the

world that art occupies and comment on. After the avant-garde, art largely became a practice of pushing the formal extremes of specific media. [...] And yet, artists have resisted manipulating capitalism directly, in the way that Hirst does. In retrospect, that might have been a tactical error.”

“If markets themselves have become the predominant form of everyday life, then it stands to reason that artists should make use of those materials as the formal basis of their works. The implications from this are disturbing. Taken to an extreme, the most formally interesting contemporary conceptual art sits behind Bloomberg terminals instead of plexiglass vitrines. [...] Even so, finance is too abstract, too extreme, and too poorly aestheticized to operate as human culture. But Silicon Valley start-ups offer just the right blend of boundary-pushing, human intrigue, ordinary life, and perverse financialization to become the heirs to the avant-garde.”

Why do you consider this project to be a meaningful exploration of emerging technology? (250 word maximum):

In what ways does your project inspire dialogue about the issues at hand, including the relationship between technology and culture? (250 word maximum):

What is more indicative of technology’s power in the world today? Is it the latest whiz-bang tech, on its face? Or could it be the underlying structure of its profound financial power (as pure wealth) and socio-political power (as ambivalent mediation)?

It would be one thing to propose an art project employing new technologies; it would be another thing to propose a new technology, artfully implemented. This is neither of these, exactly. Rather than mirror familiar binary master/servant relationships, in which one party acts in the service of another (art/tech, artist/viewer, coder/user, institution/client, company/customer), this project proposes a confrontation with, and subversion of, the fact that both the art world and the tech industry are really just instruments (i.e., servants) of wealth above all.

Money is the medium. And the medium is the message. The question is: Can this be something other than ugly?

This project would be an attempt to find out. Like so much of the arts, the crux of the matter is generosity. Even if the methods and machinery stink, is the project ultimately

more giving of itself, to the world, to culture, to people -- than it is to itself? As a project inextricable from capitalist modes, then, the crux here is intent -- what to do with its profits -- and *Simulation Simulation* intends (in a rough appropriation of Sol LeWitt's words) to be a machine that makes the money that makes the art -- and then give it all away.

Please describe your proposed plan for public engagement. What opportunities do you foresee to share prototypes, demonstrations, and process with the public? (100 word maximum):

What data will your project produce that may be of interest to other artists, technologists, or arts organizations? (250 word maximum):

Please list any other sources of funding for this project, including in-kind support, and, if applicable, any conditions related to that funding or support:

Total amount requested: \$50,000

Detailed project budget (please include direct costs, including materials, software licenses, etc., and any artist fees as well as fees for any other contributors to the project):

If appropriate, please include up to five images, schematics, renderings, etc. that represent the idea for your project embedded in your document in jpeg format. Video files should be of less than five minutes in length and included as hyperlinks in the proposal. Supporting media files are not required.

Please provide an implementation plan delineated in a chart similar to the one on the next page:

KEY MILESTONES (Major steps in the project development)

START DATE (Estimated date for each project step)

FUNDS NEEDED (Amount of funds that will be needed)