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Pareidolia and Upper Palaeolithic Art: Piloting an Interdisciplinary VR Experiment

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Abstract

The production of detailed animal depictions deep within caves during the Upper Palaeolithic (c.40,000 – 15,000 BP) has attracted a suite of theoretical interpretations. However, without falsifiable hypotheses these interpretations have remained conceptual. Interdisciplinary approaches with cognitive science thus have significant potential for yielding more meaningful insights into the context and mechanisms behind the production of Palaeolithic cave art. This research presents the results of a pilot experiment that utilised Virtual Reality (VR) environments to understand the role of pareidolia in cave art making. Participants were immersed within simulated caves and presented with 3D models of real Palaeolithic cave walls, digitally modified to remove the art. Eye tracking and audio responses were recorded to understand which features of the cave wall were visually attended to, whether this corresponded to features used in the Palaeolithic art, and if participants perceived these features as being evocative of certain forms.