The Politics of Immersive Storytelling: Virtual Reality and the Logics of Digital Ecosystems

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ABSTRACT

This article applies and extends the concept of social media logic to assess the politics of immersive storytelling on digital platforms. These politics are considered in the light of what has been identified as mass media logic, which argues that mass media in the 20th century gained power by developing a commanding discourse that guides the organization of the public sphere. The shift to social media logic in the 21st century, with its grounding principles of programmability, popularity, connectivity, and datafication, influenced a new discourse on the logics of digital ecosystems. Digital platforms such as Facebook are offering all-surrounding mediated environments to communicate in Virtual Reality (‘Facebook Spaces’) as well as immersive narratives such as Mr. Robot VR. This article provides an understanding of the politics of immersive storytelling and of its underlying principles of programmability, user experience, popularity, and platform sociality, which define immersive technologies in the 21st century.

KEYWORDS

Digital Ecosystem, Facebook, Immersive Storytelling, Mr. Robot, Social Media, Social Media Logic, Virtual Reality, VR

INTRODUCTION

On October 6, 2016, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg gave a glimpse of his vision of social networking through Virtual Reality (VR) technology. When he took the stage at Oculus Connect in California to present a demo version of the company’s ideas for VR, the announcement did not only include the launch of Facebook’s ‘360° Spatial Workstation’, a mainstream platform allowing users to upload and share 360° videos. But it also showcased the launch of ‘Facebook Spaces’, which enables users to connect with others in a VR environment. Zuckerberg’s demo imagines Facebook’s social media platform as a three-dimensional space, in which users can move and interact, feel involved, and engaged with others. User’s profiles on Facebook will be enhanced by the creation of three-dimensional digital avatars, which are able to fully interact with each other. In addition, ‘Spaces will be able to allow users to view 360° content by literally becoming surrounded by content productions such as videos, and to meet friends via their digital animated avatars, share information and watch streamed entertainment content together. Users will be able to have a feeling of presence, the immersive sense of actually being inside an immersive space.

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At the heart of ‘Spaces’ lies the utopian desire to be fully immersed in an all-surrounding mediated environment, ‘transporting’ users to unusual and hard-to-visit locations (a tropical island, under the sea, the surface of a far-away planet, or Mark Zuckerberg’s office). At these places users are able to have real-time video calls through Facebook’s messenger VOIP (named ‘Parties’), share images and play multiple-player online games such as Chess. Spatial audio gives the impression of location-based conversations. Through controllers and other haptic embodiments of the virtual environment, users are able to connect the real with the virtual, and increase the level of interactivity and connectivity (van Dijck, 2012). What Marie-Laure Ryan described as ‘digital wonderland’ almost twenty years ago seems like an accurate description of current developments in VR technology:

...[a] computer-generated three-dimensional landscape in which we would experience an expansion of our physical and sensory powers; leave our bodies and see ourselves from the outside; adopt new identities; apprehend immaterial objects through many senses; including touch; become able to modify the environment through either verbal commands or physical gestures; and see creative thoughts instantly realized without going through the process of having them physically materialized. (Ryan, 2001, p. 1)

With Facebook’s $2 billion acquisition of start-up company Oculus and its VR head mounted display-technology (HMD) Rift in 2014, and multiple new platforms such as Google (Daydream VR), Sony (Playstation VR), Samsung (Gear VR) and HTC (Vive), the idea of immersive digital ecosystems is already very much part of our cultural landscape. Oculus is part of Facebook’s strategy to expand its digital ecosystem to full sensory technology and fully immerse users on its social media platform. According to Facebook’s full year results (Facebook, 2017), monthly active users (MAU) were 1.86 billion in 2016, which is an increase of 17% year-over-year. Much more relevant are mobile MAU’s, which were 1.74 billion with an increase of 21% to the year before. Mobile advertising revenue represented approximately 84% of the advertising revenue. Immersion ((lat. immersio: dive under, dive in) is the key: Facebook claims its users already spend more than 50 minutes a day across Facebook’s suite of apps globally, a number that grows if you include communication on instant messenger service WhatsApp. A figure that, along with ad impressions and average price per ad, is about to increase with the mass market implementation of VR HMD technology and a wider range of content productions.

One strategy to the challenge of digital ecosystems to be sustainable, desirable environments is the extension of their platforms. Facebook sees its social media platform ‘Facebook’ as the foundation for the growth of its business (see Figure 1), with additional services Video, Messenger, Search, Groups and communication tools Instagram and WhatsApp as the most influential assets to reach a mass market audience through mobile devices. However, immersive technologies are the next step as outlined in its 10-year roadmap, most importantly through connectivity (drones, satellites, lasers, terrestrial solutions, telco infra and free basics) as well as artificial intelligence (AI) including communication through vision, language, reasoning, and planning. Augmented reality (AR) and VR technologies are as well in the focus of Facebook’s strategy, such as AR tech, mobile VR, Rift, Touch (Rift’s haptic controller) and Social VR (incl. ‘Spaces’, ‘Parties’, and other all-surrounding mediated environments).

Major digital companies are investing in VR technology and their influence spans across entertainment, games, journalism, film and TV. The result is what is called a ‘console or platform war’, in which the most accessible hardware with the most appealing software and content solutions still have yet to find its audience. On the hardware side, high-end market competitors Oculus, HTC and Sony are linking their own individual headsets to premium content products (such as games or VR experiences) to compete with cheaper cardboard and mid-range plastic solutions for mobile phones (Samsung, Google). On the content side, the language of VR storytelling is about to be explored with widely recognised VR productions such as the Mr. Robot VR experience (2016), the Academy Award nominated short Pearl (2017) and ILMxLAB’s forthcoming Darth Vader VR Experience. VR
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