Chapter 4

Narrative Strategies in VR Movies, Traditional Movies, and Digital Games

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ABSTRACT

Virtual reality (VR) movies have gained tremendous attention in recent years, with an increasing amount of experimentations and explorations from researchers and practitioners with various backgrounds. Many VR movies are aimed at providing the audience with a narrative experience, just as in traditional film and digital games. VR movies are a relatively new art form. The audience’s experiences in VR movies share many common properties with traditional film and narrative games. On the other hand, VR movies offer a unique way for the audience to view and interact with the content, which differentiates it from other visual and narrative-based digital experiences. In this chapter, the authors review the narrative techniques used in movies and narrative games and present a survey and analysis of whether the techniques can or have been applied to VR movies.

INTRODUCTION

Virtual reality (VR) technologies have developed rapidly in recent years. Devices for creating virtual reality, such as head-mounted stereoscopic displays and motion sensors, have been widely used in entertainment, pedagogical, and assistive technology applications. In particular, the emergence and development of VR technologies provide artists, designers, and researchers with new tools to create highly immersive narrative art. VR has been used to provide a unique form of visual narrative experience—the virtual reality (VR) movie.

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Age of Sail (Figure 1), which was nominated for the Venice Award for Best Virtual Reality, is a good example of a VR movie (Age of Sail, 2018). It tells the story about an old sailor named William Avery who is drifting in the North Atlantic. On his way, he saves a little girl, who later lights up new hope in his life. Another example is Pearl, which was nominated for the Oscar Award for Best Animated Short Film category. This six-minute short film tells a story about personal growth—how a father and his daughter spent a happy time together in an old car (Pearl, 2017). Both Age of Sail and Pearl were produced by Google Spotlight Stories—Google’s story experience platform for VR movies. Both films have a strong narrative component. Although they share similar narrative and artistic characteristics as traditional movies, the fact that the audience can choose their viewing angles provides a hugely different experience.

Firebird Series: The Unfinished is a VR movie that won the 2017 VRCORE Award for Best Film category (Firebird Series: The Unfinished, 2017). In this VR movie, the audience is put in a museum dedicated to the mighty sculptor Auguste. On the night before the grand opening, the statues become alive and whisper about Auguste’s love story with Camille. This is a VR film that integrates interaction and narration skillfully. The audience can feel the charm of the story, and at the same time—the development of the story through their own choice and interaction.

Henry tells the story of a cute hedgehog who constantly seeks friendship. This work becomes the first Emmy-winning virtual reality movie in the United States (Henry, 2015). In this VR movie, the audience is free to visit Henry’s living space and bedroom downstairs, and a restaurant upstairs. Additionally, in order to establish emotional bonds with the audience, Henry sometimes turns his big, watery eyes to look directly at the audience.

As we can see, in most VR movies, the audience or user needs to move the story forward through their own choices and interactions. Even when they cannot affect how the story develops, the user has control over their own viewpoint, and can experience the story from different perspectives and locations. For example, Duet was nominated for the Oscar for Best Animated Short in 2014. It tells stories about how a boy and a girl grow up together and fall in love (Duet, 2014). Every time the two characters pass by each other, the audience needs to make a choice: viewing the next segment of the content from the boy’s perspective or from the girl’s perspective. Thus, the audience is both viewing a movie and helping decide how the movie is shown.

Storytelling has been the focus of many entertainment experiences. As VR movies gain popularity, the authors believe it is time to study how storytelling in VR movies is related to, or different from storytelling in traditional movies and digital games. In this chapter, we want to explore the space of storytelling techniques that can be used in VR movies by first looking at how storytelling is used in traditional movies and narrative games.