Chapter 8
Discovering a Language of Stories in Immersive Storytelling: An Essential First Step

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the author explores storytelling in immersive media along with a systematic way of utilizing other forms of media to inform choices in these new techniques. The author argues that storytelling, as a human instinct, shows up in all forms of media as they emerge and that we are now at the beginning step on a long road of discovery. The chapter goes on to explore traditional forms of storytelling for the stage and screen to see how those mediums can inform emerging immersive media. Examples are presented of early immersive media that have achieved more or less success in telling a story.

INTRODUCTION

Stories still exist in immersive media (Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality, and 360 videos). Only their presentation has evolved from storytelling to story experiencing. The author discovered this by diving into immersive storytelling and creating 360 video experiences. As a former dancer who then worked in cinematic film and television, the author’s approach to telling immersive stories started from a natural place of blocking or exploring how a person might move through a world in order to guide future participants through an experience. The author’s experience spurred the concept of using the traditional aspects of mise en scène, the French term of where to place on stage, but reinterpreting them for immersive mediums, focusing first on 360 video experiences, and then moving on to virtual reality with full agency, and finally augmented reality.

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The goal of this chapter, based on the author’s practice, is to suggest a systematic approach for telling compelling stories across media that will uniformly evoke a language anyone can use to tell their desired story best.

BACKGROUND

Immersive media defined here as a general term encompassing 360 videos, Virtual Reality, and Augmented Reality. Each of these is on the spectrum of what is also called Mixed Reality. This spectrum offers the user different levels of immersion, agency, and interactivity. The author defines agency as the ability for the user to exist and take action in the virtual world as they can within the real world.

360 video is a live-action or animated video where the person experiencing the video (user, viewer or participant) puts on a head-mounted display (HMD) to immerse their self in the world with three degrees of freedom (DoF). Those three degrees allow the user to look around left and right, or up and down, but they cannot move forward or back within the virtual 360-degree world. Interactivity can exist in 360 videos by utilizing the participant’s gaze, voice, or with remote control. It is possible to view a 360 video through a browser or by utilizing a mobile device as a magic window. However, for this chapter, the author refers solely to the experience as delivered through an HMD.

Full Virtual Reality is a live-action or animated experience where the user has six degrees of freedom in an HMD. The user has full agency to move throughout all spatial aspects of the virtual world. The creator of the experience defines the level of agency. In most experiences, the user will have an avatar representing their character in the virtual world, whether it be just hands or a full-body, and with this persona, the user interacts with the surrounding environment.

Augmented Reality (AR) refers to digital assets layered on or atop a real-world physical environment. The user has full agency in the physical world while the AR overlays digital or video elements for viewing and potential interaction. Augment Reality can be experienced via the magic window of a mobile device or with a special see-through HMD or display device that allows simultaneous viewing of real-world and virtual elements.

Some critics have suggested that authentic storytelling is not possible in immersive media, but the author takes the opposite position—believing that storytelling is an innate human experience, in line with the thinking of anthropologist Yuval Harari who says:

_The real difference between us and chimpanzees is the mysterious glue that enables millions of humans to cooperate effectively. This mysterious glue is made of stories, not genes. We cooperate effectively with strangers because we believe in things like gods, nations, money and human rights. Yet none of these things exists outside the stories that people invent and tell one another. (Harari, 2017)_

Like Yuval Harari’s beliefs, the natural disposition of humans is to buy into a collective fiction that only exists as ideas. These ideas create a shared belief system that centers around stories. This concept is essential to creating stories in immersive media as well as for the communication between humans. They push storytelling beyond entertainment as they also underpin so many aspects of human life on earth. For example, scientist Laura Osburn uses storytelling for design practices in the real-world.
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