Chapter 10

Case Study of The BizNest: The World’s First Immersive Sitcom

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ABSTRACT

The immersive medium of extended reality presents plentiful opportunities to invent and reinvent. Some of these opportunities are technical, some are creative, and some are a mix. One of the agreed upon areas in this new medium that has been in need of invention and reinvention is storytelling. This chapter presents a case study of the world’s first immersive sitcom produced by Exelauno, explaining how it came about and why it promises to open up a new avenue of storytelling for virtual and extended reality. It will share insights gained through the process of creating the series. And it will cover revelations gained at all stages—from rehearsals through post-production—about narrative, directing, comedy, and more in the context of this new immersive world.

INTRODUCTION

The immersive medium of extended reality (XR) presents plentiful opportunities to invent and reinvent. Some of these opportunities are technical, some are creative and some are a mix. One of the agreed upon areas in this new medium that has been in need of invention and reinvention is storytelling. Stanford Professor Jeremy Bailenson, in his excellent book on virtual reality, Experience On Demand (2018), devotes a whole chapter to what he calls “stories in the round.” He covers various solutions and approaches that he’s gathered from talking to everyone from Brett Leonard, the director of Lawnmower Man (1992) to James Cameron’s VFX guru for Avatar. And yet, there is one genre his chapter does not consider and one format unaddressed: that of comedic VR. To be fair, when his book was published in January 2018, this specific genre didn’t yet exist. In 2017, when the Facebook VR content team heard about plans for the first 360VR sitcom, they said, “Good luck. No one knows how to do comedy in VR.” By 2019, while viewing The BizNest, Oculus employees were laughing—not at the idea—but at the immersive show itself. (It’s a comedy, so that’s a good thing!) This chapter presents a case study
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of the world’s first immersive sitcom produced by Exelauno, explaining how it came about and why it promises to open up a new avenue of storytelling for virtual and extended reality. It will share insights gained through the process of creating the series. And it will cover revelations gained at all stages—from rehearsals through post-production—about narrative, directing, comedy and more—in the context of this new immersive world.

THE SHOW: AN IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCE

Imagine if instead of just watching the television show *Friends* (1994-2004) or *The Office* (2005-2013), you could be in it, sitting inside the iconic Central Perk coffee house in 1990s Manhattan or at a desk next to Jim, salesman and office prankster, at the Dunder Mifflin paper company. Well, that describes *The BizNest*. It is the world’s first 360VR immersive sitcom, and it is set in a co-working space where YOU, the viewer, are a member, surrounded by freelancers and entrepreneurs who are working, socializing, flirting, antagonizing, and navigating the modern work-life balancing act.¹ This series is a thoroughly enjoyable entertainment experience and also a brand new, replicable format for storytelling in an immersive medium. In the same way that the multi-camera television format led to the Golden Age of Television Comedy, the narrative and directorial format pioneered and presented by *The BizNest* has the potential to create a similar legacy.

An abbreviated synopsis of the immersive experience follows:

*The commute is a cinch. You put on an Oculus Go, or any other VR headset, and are transported to The BizNest co-working space, where you can look around and take in your desk and coworkers. Your fellow “BizNesters” approach with questions, problems and commentary, and you experience a level of engagement that makes you feel part of this community.*

*Today, one-hit wonder novelist Donna shows up for the first time, needing a quiet place to work. Life-hacker Tim forgot his wallet and can’t afford lunch. Science writer Kate has a meltdown on account of her unspoken attraction to Tim. Fashion designer Rebecca puts her brother Uri on the spot when she’s late for a big meeting. And your co-worker Sadie won’t stop bothering you about all that tax stuff you need to do for your LLC. It’s just another day at The BizNest and you’re in the middle of the action.*

*After witnessing how the day plays out, you’re left with a feeling of happiness, and a desire to spend more time with these charming, quirky characters.*

*The BizNest* set out to fully utilize 360 degrees, situate the viewer in a believable world and pioneer spatial storytelling, redefining sitcom conventions for a new medium. The result is an immersive, real-time experience with multiple interwoven stories—more than TV—and a rich storytelling environment. Now, how did it come to be?