Chapter 11
Virtual eXperience as a Mass Market Phenomenon:
Spatial Computing and the World Building Challenge

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ABSTRACT
The focus of this chapter is twofold: How do we create immersive work that incorporates the best of our traditional media knowledge into this new realm? and How do we take new forms of immersive media to mass market? This chapter also covers the process of creating an innovative immersive new wave, independent cinema that incorporates a feature-length film done in multiple media formats with immersion at the core. Activating our own creative imaginations and unleashing participants and empowering them with this technology is the only positive route ahead into the future of immersive media.

INTRODUCTION
The current era of immersive media was ushered in with the astronomic sales of a crowd-funded Virtual Reality (VR) headset called the Oculus Rift. It didn’t matter that mostly gamers were behind this sales push, because the next step was the attention and investment placed in this fledgling VR gear by Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook, who infused the nascent company with over two billion dollars. That action influenced other investors to start seeing where they could put their funding; surely Facebook knew something important.

Virtual reality has gone through several waves of development, from the earliest research in the 1960s, through the first wave of hope and hype in the late 1980s and early 1990s, to now, this third wave.
Now, five years after the launch of Oculus Rift, many of the promised riches have not materialized. Even Facebook is still waiting for their bet to pay off big time (Hoium, 2018). Other early investors have become disillusioned, and many early VR companies have been closing doors for lack of further cash (Rubin, 2017), (Jenkins, 2019).

But there are some players starting to take baby steps, as exemplified by Amazon’s recent announcement about their Amazon Prime Portal (Dotson, 2019). With Portal, the company has opened all their traditional work (2D films and television shows) in their Amazon Prime Library for personal viewing in a VR device. To be clear, these are not native immersive works, they are traditional media simply viewed with the screen strapped to your face. However, Amazon is also including ten 360-degree videos in this launch, which starts to open the door to mainstream immersive content. Netflix, YouTube and others are also offering similar services. So a few companies are cautiously opening that door, although in a much more measured way than how the initial frenzy began.

Currently, true immersive media is largely “playing to its own room.” Practitioners in this new wave have thus far failed to reach out and embrace what it means to actually create Virtual eXperiences (VX) that both appeal to and meet some need for the average person/participant/audience.

We are at a crux in the development of immersive media. There is currently a bit of a backlash from segments like early investors, who may have come too soon to the game and are now a bit disappointed things are not further along. Much of that early funding centered on gear such as headsets and cameras. What was lacking was the content, and funding for that content, but content requires the new medium to start defining itself.

We are finding ourselves at a transitional point where we have to leverage off of the best we have learned from previous media—find what DNA from earlier media fits naturally in the new immersive realm—and then investigate and test what needs to be invented. Finding the natural affordances of a new medium takes time and experimentation. Film itself went through many stages to get to the mature state we now enjoy. From adding camera techniques to including sound, film vocabulary has evolved through dedicated trials and errors. Immersive media will take a similar trajectory.

Many creators who came into the space came in from different disciplines. Many people coming from cinema didn’t really understand the unique qualities of immersive media. The emergence of 360 video started as a transitional step; it was something cinema people could wrap their heads around. So a wall arose between cinema and immersion, which started to codify and calcify itself. For traditional cinema creators, 360 video became the mechanism of immersive media. Unfortunately, seeing this as the solution to immersive media/VR didn’t really serve to advance anything about a new form of media and storytelling. It, in essence, stifled more critical advances.

The approach I took as a traditional film person who has a unique connection to VR was more open. It was an approach to embrace traditional cinematic techniques and immersion within the same work, to the best of the current abilities of both aspects.

This chapter details the story of my work, *Hollywood Rooftop*, a transitional hybrid cinematic immersive piece that keeps the best of cinematic techniques while exploring the new possibilities on true immersion in media. Within this chapter I share the creative process of this work—one that brings old and new aspects together in unique, novel ways. I include the discoveries along the way that required inventing techniques to link the best possibilities inherent in each media form, sharing the lessons learned from planning, to staging, to shooting, to post production and distribution.
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