Chapter 12
Cinematic Virtual Reality:
Inside the Story

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ABSTRACT
This chapter presents a case study of the groundbreaking PBS digital studies cinematic VR film My Brother’s Keeper. It covers all aspects of cinematic VR from conception and writing for the medium to ensuring the technology serves the story, filming, and postproduction. The piece set a bar for innovation in cinematic VR as the first production to combine 360- and 180-degree stereoscopic image capture to forward story and character interaction, the first to use true slow-motion 120 frames-per-second in VR and the first to establish intimacy with camera movement and close-ups, among other innovations. Six key videos are discussed, illustrating and demonstrating the principles of filmmaking innovation articulated in the chapter, as well as insights from behind the scenes interviews with the directors, producers, cast, and technologists talk about the making of the piece.

INTRODUCTION
For centuries, regardless of the medium, it has been the deepest desire of storytellers to immerse their audience into the storyworlds that they create; to have the characters come alive in front of and all around them; to make the story as real as possible. Virtual reality filmmaking holds the promise to realize the storyteller’s dream to put the audience inside the story. This chapter will cover the current and evolving state of what is referred to as cinematic VR, defined as immersive story-driven narrative films in 360 or 180-degree mono and/or stereoscopic formats. From technology to technique it will document both the leveraging of best practices over 100 years of cinematic production history into the new medium of virtual passive and interactive reality, and the establishment of a new language of filmmaking. The chapter, told from a first person perspective, presents the cinematic VR film My Brother’s Keeper from PBS Digital Studios as a case study to familiarize readers with the evolving storytelling medium of cinematic virtual reality from concept to screen. It focuses on six key innovations developed for this film, along with links to the videos that illustrate them.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-2433-6.ch012
BACKGROUND

I am a storyteller. And I know now, it has always been that way. The imaginary worlds that children create and inhabit may be child’s play for others but for me, it was training. I had one of those mothers who proudly saved everything I wrote growing up. Not long ago, in digging through the “archives” after her death I found a short story written on construction paper called *The Lonely Petunia*. It was the story of a beautiful sole petunia growing up in a rose garden. Setting aside the probable autobiographical aspects of the second grader who wrote it, the story world created was rich, and colorful, the characters well defined, the cannons of gardening duly observed and an ending that was well, tragic and yet poignantly impactful. As the writer, I wanted people to “immerse” themselves in the story I was telling; perhaps more importantly I wanted them to feel what it was like to be that petunia.

Hindsight being what it is I can see how the training progressed over the decades. It seems to me that it is never the “what” of storytelling that changes. All those prime elements of the fine art of story remain essential: great characters, a rich world in which they come to life, a story that absolutely must be told, and of course the opportunity for the audience to imagine themselves as part of that story and storyworld. It is the “how” of storytelling, thanks to technology, that changes. From the printing press, to the motion picture, from television to the internet, from 2D to 3D, advances in technology continue forward giving creators more and more tools to author story-driven experiences for the audience.

Mastering new technologies of storytelling will forever present both the challenge and the excitement of innovation as well as numerous cautionary tales of making sure that technology serves the story rather than the other way around. While experience is said to be the best teacher, sometimes you must set aside what you know and approach the “new” with both wonder and deliberateness at the same time. Recently, while working with a very accomplished and award-winning director of what we now have come to call “traditional” media, I put it this way. “I truly respect all that you know and all that you have done in this industry. Now, here, can you, if only for a moment, forget what you know and what you have done before and the way you have done it? And, can you resist, again just for a moment, comparing the technology or the process to anything that has come before? With an open mind you will ‘get’ this. And once you do, you’ll be able to bring back everything you know—all of your experience. You’ll experiment and bring your wealth of knowledge to the platform. You’ll see what works and what doesn’t. The more open you are to the technology the more open the technology will be for you.” I didn’t tell him about the potential for motion sickness. That would come later. And there, experience would be the best teacher.

I had first seen “Virtual Reality” at the University of British Colombia in 1997. It was heavy, bulky and anything but portable. I actually don’t even remember what I saw because I think my imagination of what it could be took off. But it made impression enough that I remember thinking “Someday, I am going to be doing this.” Then, in December 2014, the Samsung Gear VR Innovator Edition arrived. I put it on and watched “Introduction to Virtual Reality” produced by Felix & Paul Studios (2016). I cried. I remember thinking: “This is what I have been waiting for my entire life. And I know exactly what I want to do with this.” It has always been my deepest desire to immerse the audience in the storyworlds I create; to have the characters and the story world come alive in front of and all around them and to make the story as real as possible. Perhaps that is every storyteller’s desire. I know that we want to move people. Whether I had realized that consciously before or not didn’t matter because I knew I had the answer then and there. I felt like immersive storytelling was in my DNA.
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